

Lilith

Independent, Jewish & frankly feminist

Breast Cancer
and Our Family
Connections
Breaking Up
over Food
Self-Harm
What's a Cutter
to Do?
Making the
Transition
from Male
to Female

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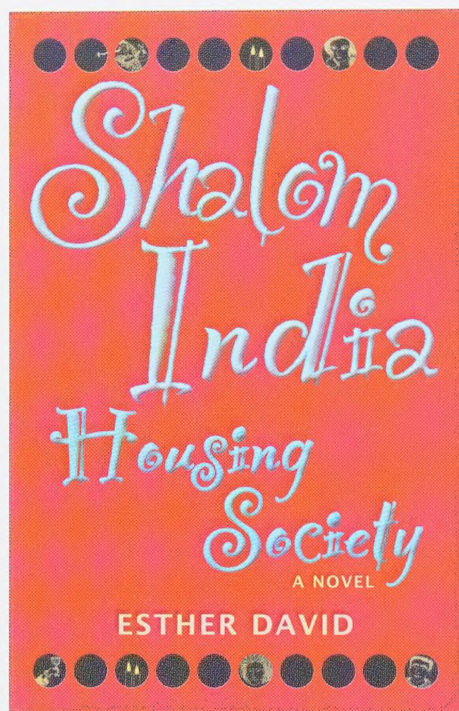
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OUR BODIES... IT'S COMPLICATED

Joy Ladin, formerly Jay Ladin



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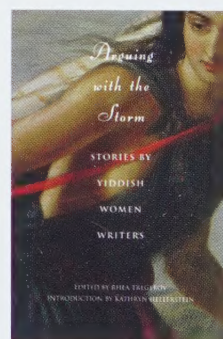
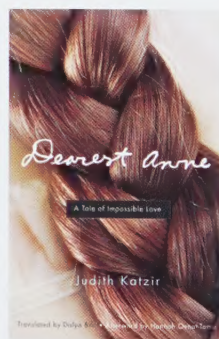
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Lilith

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vol. 34, no. 4

In the Garden of Eden, long before the eating of the apple, the Holy One created the first human beings—a man, Adam, and a woman, Lilith. Lilith said, “We are equal because we are created from the same earth.”

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Lilith

independent, Jewish & frankly feminist

Just as we were concluding this issue of *Lilith*, I was stunned to see end-of-decade media items bursting upon us with bizarre and constricting images of women, and women's bodies—some focusing explicitly on Jewish women. What's driving this? Is it the recession? Does economic anxiety cause people to unleash such thoughts?

In its December issue, *Details* magazine, that laddie mag for men in a state of arrested development, ran a feature entitled "The Rise of the Hot Jewish Girl." It touted the joys of Jewish women's bodies—as if there were one single body type for everyone who identifies as a Jew. "Big, natural boobs" were among the lusted-after characteristics all Jewish women are thought to possess, and the *Details* website (not to drive any traffic there, dear reader) shows Queen Esther, Theda Bara, Betty Boop and La Streisand as part of our sexual (and embodied) inheritance. In fact, it's an old trope. In literature, Jewish women for centuries



Now: the stereotype has been reborn, but in different clothing. Literally. You'll discover in the Voices section of this issue that "Coasties" are Jewish women from New York or L.A., reviled on YouTube and on their Midwestern campus for dressing similarly in popular brands and spending too much of "Daddy's money." (Please, please make sure to note the assumption that

all spending money comes from fathers, not mothers. And that linking Jews to money is a very ancient variety of anti-Semitism masquerading here as misogyny.)

Also now: the *New York Observer*, an otherwise respected, often reliably hip weekly newspaper, published in December a straightfaced report about "cheetahs"—sexually assertive and desperately marriage-deprived New York women over 25 (*i.e.*, well past their prime) who are described as routinely taking advantage of drunken men, having sex with them and then not even having the decency to leave before morning. Women—Jewish women at

Our bodies—as we see them, and as others do.

have been viewed as the "other"—seen by non-Jews as exotic, desirable, or dangerous, and sometimes as all three at once. You can imagine where this is all going, without even reading the article, which fetishizes Jewish women's bodies, demonstrating old bias in new clothing. Or no clothing.

And did I mention that the illustration for the magazine piece featured a woman's headless, limbless torso seen from the rear, its bare back and scantily-pantied bum revealing a Star of David tattooed just above the panty line?

I'm not making this stuff up, I swear. And there's more.

Though the *Details* article claimed to be admiring Jewish women while actually objectifying them (us), the past few months have seen nastier characterizations I thought we'd washed out of the culture 20 years ago. Now seems an appropriate time, what with the new decade and all, to take a look at the parallels between then and now.

Then: Jewish women (I'm talking 1980s here) were characterized as JAPs (no insult intended towards Asians; as you're well aware, reader, the sobriquet Jewish American Princess is the root of this acronym). The JAP was in those days reviled in cartoons, books, greeting cards and everyday teen talk and adult slang. A Jewish female too young to be a Jewish Mother (though she might indeed be a mother) and immature enough to be completely preoccupied with herself, she was characterized as demanding. Bad in bed. Materialistic. Spoiled. This stereotypical Jewish woman is blamed for wanting to marry a doctor, blamed if she wants to become a doctor. Too passive, and also too aggressive. Not much room to maneuver there.

least—have in the past been reviled by comedians and disgruntled lovers for being frigid or uninterested in sex. Now, women are reviled for acting too boldly on their desires. Not much room to maneuver here either. The cheetah is posited as the "younger niece" of the cougar, that predatory woman who pursues men younger than she is. (Please pause again and note that the animal imagery for women has shifted. Women used to suffer poultification—we were called chicks, mother hens, old birds. But no one is afraid of poultry. These big cats, however, at least in real life and not just as metaphors, are fearsome: cheetahs, cougars, jaguars. What's coming next?)

Lilith offers you now an antidote to these deracinated and actually rather scary projections about Jewish women's bodies, motives and desires. The writers in this issue aren't afraid to examine their own experiences, speaking in their own voices about their bodies and their relationships. These reports from the field are not upbeat, but they are truthful. From breast cancer, gender dysmorphia and cutting to the holiness of how we feed ourselves, and how we care for the body when life has departed.

Honoring the stories of *real* women in this issue, let us offer a toast to a decade of continued development, to good thinking and good writing. L'Chaim. Happy 2010.

Susan

Susan Weidman Schneider
Editor in Chief



Reality Videos

Following the hit Israeli TV show “In Treatment” (*B’Tipul*), a new program is garnering avid fans in Israel. In *Mehubarot* (“Connected”), five women ages 16 though 42 were each given a video camera and agreed to document their personal lives by shooting at least an hour a day. The television series began daily broadcasts of 50 episodes based on these video diaries in May, and viewers say the show reveals, in a way seldom seen on screen, the intimate lives of a high schooler in Holon, a university student who is also a website sex symbol, a 36-year-old childless divorcee trying to decide about becoming a parent, a married journalist of 37 who seems to have it all and wonders if this is all there is, and the re-married 42-year-old mother of three daughters.



A Day of Harvesting in the Galilee

The clientele for my culinary tours in the Galilee has, until recently, been exclusively visitors from overseas. Even the most intrepid tourist, I understood, would never be able to find the region's reclusive goat cheese makers, passionate vintners and edible wild plant gatherers I've spent years seeking out. Furthermore, I generally eschew restaurant visits, preferring whenever possible to arrange home hospitality, since cooking with a local family, whether Jewish or Arab, invariably results in a moving and unforgettable cross-cultural experience.

My first event for Israelis was a fundraiser I organized to benefit S.K.A., a non-profit social welfare organization in the Arab city of Kufar Manda in the lower Galilee. S.K.A. (for Sustainable Humanitarian Aid) delivers subsidized food, legal services, and dental care to families in severe economic need. What makes this organization special, particularly in the Arab sector, is that it is entirely secular and unaffiliated, a purely grassroots initiative in an environment where charity is usually dominated by the church or mosque.

The challenge, I knew, would be to bring Israeli Jews to Kufar Manda. For many, this town is especially contentious, still associated with the violence that spilled out from it during the start of the Second Intifada in October 2000. My idea was to plan an olive har-

vest day which would include picking olives, eating a homemade lunch of local foods, listening to a talk by a local authority on the traditions of olive harvesting in the Galilee, and visiting a local olive press.

A food journalist from one of the national dailies agreed to write a promotional article in advance of the event, and calls began to come in. We hoped for 40 people and in the end we had 58 Jewish Israelis of all ages, from a nursing infant to retired folk in their 80s, and from as far off as Jerusalem, Ashkelon and Tel Aviv. They accepted the invitation to visit an Arab city, and to join in this ancient Galilee harvest ritual.

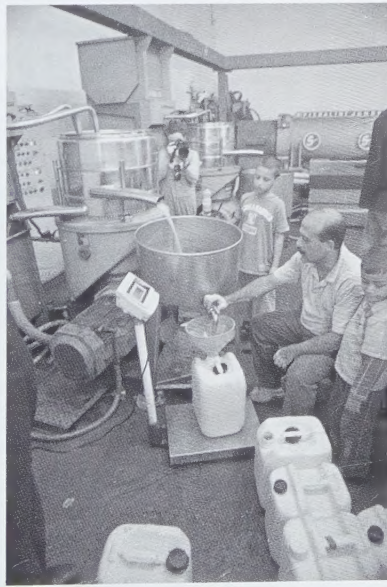
The day of the harvest was hot and dry, but a lively wind made the work of picking pleasant, and the children climbed into the branches of the trees to reach the high-growing fruit. Most of the olives we harvested were packed into sacks for the local landowner who donated the use of his grove for the event. After an hour among the trees, we convened in the shade and Dr. Shukry Arraf, an expert on traditional agriculture in the Galilee, spoke about how the introduction of industrial machinery not only transformed the way people process olives, but how it also rendered obsolete much of the rich vocabulary associated with this work.

The wives of the S.K.A. volunteers prepared our lunch—the kind of home-cooked Galilee Arab food that is almost impossible to find in a restaurant. Eating a festive meal outdoors is the highlight of any olive harvesting day, and our meal included cooked chicory, the spinach-like wild green that is a delicacy here, and *farike*—kernels of wheat that were picked while still green, then roasted, and prepared in a similar fashion as bulgur, with fresh sheep-milk yogurt on the side. For the main course, there was *muhammar*, chicken whose namesake color comes from the sour red spice called sumac. It was served on large, flat breads made with flour milled from wheat grown in Kufar Manda, baked in a wood-burning *tabun* oven, and soaked in onions fried in plenty of olive oil. For dessert there were balls of deep-fried dough drenched in honey syrup.

After the meal, we made the short drive to the olive press. Local families were milling around, loading their olives into the hopper and gathering around the final station, where the freshly pressed olive oil flowed in a green stream into the waiting containers. Our group spread around the huge interior, excitedly watching the olives make their way through the belly of the press. The novelty of so many Jewish visitors in this bastion of Arab activity made the locals a little awkward, but they answered the outsiders' questions and explained the details of the process, from olive picking to pressing. Suddenly someone brought in a bag of fresh pita bread and invited the visitors to dip in and taste the aromatic and pungent oil fresh from the press.

Many times I have experienced the power of food to break through obstacles of suspicion and distrust that separate people of different backgrounds—here, between Israeli Jews and Arabs.

ABBIE ROSNER



Generations of Women Rabbis

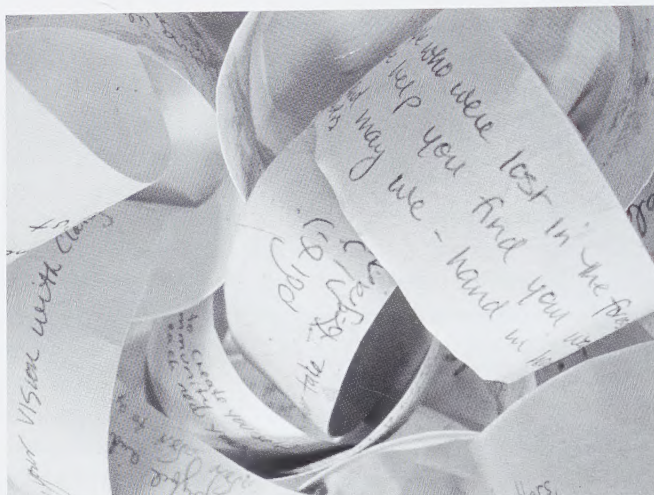
Twenty-four years after the Jewish Theological Seminary finally ordained a woman Conservative Rabbi, that woman—**Amy Eilberg**—and 79 other women rabbis from all over the United States were back at the seminary in New York City for “Leadership Presence: Women’s Ways in the Rabbinate.” The November conference, sponsored by the Rabbinical Assembly, was one of the rare meetings convened specifically for women Conservative rabbis. It attracted nearly one-third of the 256 women members of the R.A., the worldwide association of Conservative rabbis.

Women comprise about 16 percent of the 1,600 R.A. membership, and they are clearly making inroads in the organizations of Conservative Judaism, with **Rabbi Julie Schonfeld**, executive vice president of the R.A., very visible at the conference sessions along with **Rabbi Ellen S. Wolintz-Fields**, chair of the R.A. Women’s Committee.

Scholarship, humor and the need to get out there and negotiate for salaries equal to that of male rabbis set the tone, with workshops on “My Rabbinic Path: An Interactive Exercise in Personal Strategic Planning,” executive coaching sessions to “Create an Impact,” and “Resiliency in Today’s World.”

Rabbi Amy Kalmanofsky, assistant professor of Bible at JTS, brought in the Witch of Ein Dor as the long-shot precedent for religious professional women of the Hebrew Bible. (In the midst of battle, King Saul contacted the witch to confer with the spirit of the deceased Prophet Samuel; Samuel 1, chapter 28.)

The joy that the women of this smart and diverse cohort seemed to take in one another was clear when they defined their expertise at a session on writing op-eds titled “Voices of Women Rabbis Can Make an Impact in the Public Sphere: How to Write to Change the World.” Surprisingly, none of the participants listed “rabbi” as part of her qualifications at the session led by Katie Orenstein of the Op-Ed project (www.theopedproject.org). As conference organizer Wolintz-Fields said afterwards, “There are many different ways to show success in the rabbinate.” The fact that



A paper chain of wishes for the next generation of women rabbis.

these pioneering women recognize that the title alone doesn’t define the person could well be one of the major improvements women rabbis are making.

“Celebrating the First Generation of Women Rabbinical Assembly Members,” Rabbi Eilberg, now director of the Interfaith Conversations Project at the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning in St. Paul, spoke of learning from the next generation of women rabbis. Rabbi Nina Bieber Feinstein, lecturer in practical rabbinics at American Jewish University in Los Angeles,

expressed both joy in her work and frustration that women rabbis who work part time are still being told, “You haven’t really worked.”

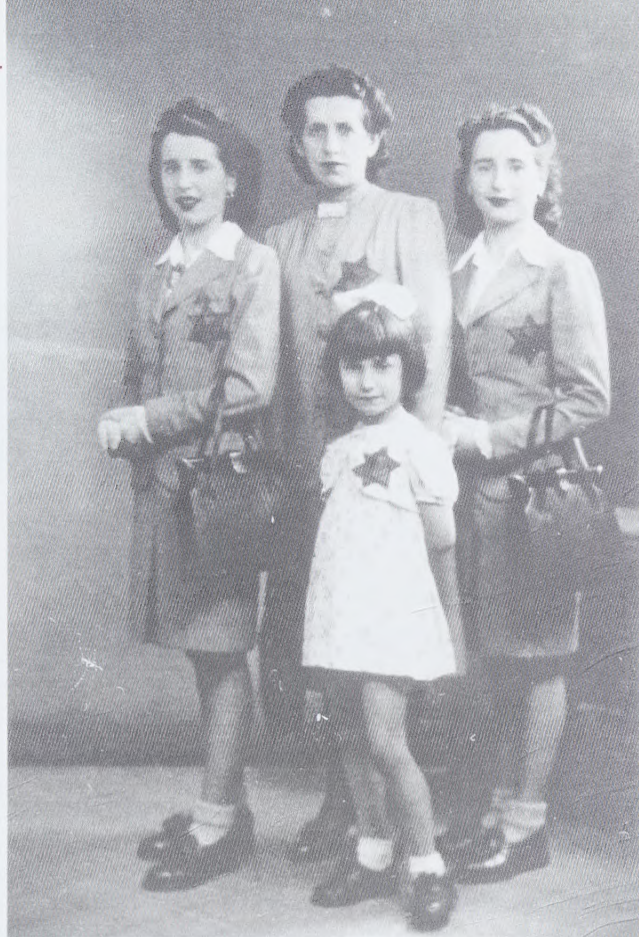
In fact, many of the women attending the conference are part-time rabbis who were able to attend the conference thanks to travel stipends provided through the Jewish Women’s Foundation of New York, which funded the conference.

A blast from the past, when the Women’s Movement first discovered assertiveness training, blew through the conference in a session on negotiations led by Sara Laschever, co-author of *Women Don’t Ask: Negotiations and the Gender Divide*. She drew a sigh of recognition with her opener: “Women are great at negotiating—for others.” In the words of one seemingly assertive and successful congregational rabbi, “I could have used this 20 years ago.” Another woman drew appreciative laughs when she told how she had gently shamed her synagogue’s board into paying her a salary equal to a male rabbi’s by pointing out, “You wouldn’t want the community to know you don’t treat women on a par with men.”

For Rabbi Ayelet Cohen of Manhattan’s Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, a.k.a. the “Gay Synagogue,” now that women are widely accepted as Conservative rabbis the next challenge is clear. “Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in the Conservative rabbinate are where straight women were 20 years ago. As we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, it’s our generational responsibility to advocate for openly lesbian and gay rabbis.”

AMY STONE WITH NAOMI DANIS

“People called me a dreamer,” says Weitzman Institute of Science researcher **Prof. Ada Yonath** of Israel, just awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize in Chemistry for her research on ribosomes, the cell’s protein factories.



Mothers, Daughters and the Holocaust

When she was first teaching, **Sara Horowitz** dodged her students' questions about gender and the Holocaust. "This isn't the place to push your women's studies agendas," the Director of the Centre for Jewish Studies at York University in Toronto recalls responding. Eventually, her students' questions inspired her to rethink a deeply embedded notion within Holocaust scholarship: that because every Jew regardless of gender was equally a target of the Nazis, focusing on women detracts from the gravity of the genocide against Jews. Horowitz became fascinated with questions not just about what happened to Jewish women, but about their inner lives as they were living through the war, and how they grappled with their memories after liberation.

With a background in comparative literature, she immersed herself in fiction written by survivors, oral and video testimonies and survivor diaries to glean how our cultural memory of the Holocaust has been shaped by women.

Last October, Horowitz spoke in Washington on "Mothers and Daughters in the Holocaust," the inaugural lecture in the Holocaust Studies Forum, jointly sponsored by American University's Department of History and Jewish Studies Program and the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The talk drew on her research for the book she is completing: *Gender, Genocide and Jewish Memory*. Three sets of questions emerge from this work: How did women's

roles as mothers or daughters shape their experiences? How do daughters who survived (both with and without their mothers) later look back at their mothers and their experiences during the war? And how do daughters born after the war to a mother survivor understand their mothers' experiences?

Many of the stories that Horowitz recounted in her lecture reflected tragedy of almost unbearable proportions: women accidentally suffocating their babies to muffle their cries; a new mother's breasts being bound so she can hold but not feed her baby; a woman taking a small child out of the arms of her grandmother and into the hands of her mother at the ramp in Auschwitz, essentially ensuring a death sentence for her mother, since her grandmother and the child would have been killed as a matter of course.

But there were also tales of incredible "heroism under deprivation," women who managed to feed and physically or psychologically protect their families, to spirit their children away to safety, to march into Gestapo stations demanding the whereabouts of their husbands, and to engage with the Resistance.

These stories didn't end with liberation; rather, women and their families continue to wrestle with the memories and the legacy of these experiences.

So why is it important to know these women's stories? Full disclosure: I'm not a scholar, but as the daughter of a woman concentration-camp survivor, I feel hearing women's collective stories is important for several reasons. First, women frequently provided the physical

and psychological touchstones that helped their children survive unimaginable conditions and circumstances. A mother's last words could reverberate a message of hope and worthiness, helping her children deflect rather than internalize oppression. In this way, women's messages added not just to the physical survival of the Jewish people, but also to the endurance of its moral compass. Mothers also often encouraged their children to survive and bear witness, a task survivors have certainly achieved.

Second, how women who survived managed to live with their wartime experiences affected the next generation in ways that we are only beginning to understand. For example, daughters of women survivors almost universally experience their mothers as carrying deep secrets, as being inaccessible, whether these mothers spoke openly about the Holocaust or whether they changed their identities to avoid having to speak about them at all.

Third, women's stories give us an additional lens through which to view the specificity of Nazi atrocities, as well as the universality of genocide, mass murder and torture. Horowitz generously makes the case that many Holocaust books and films have left out women's stories precisely because what happens to women touches us on such a primal level that it was perhaps almost unbearable to deal with. That might well have been the case—and telling their stories now is important in reaffirming our own humanity, as well as "re-humanizing" victims and survivors.

Yael Flusberg

Challah for the People

Five years ago Challah for Hunger started as a student service in Claremont Colleges in California. Students **Eli Winkelman** and **Melinda Koster** combined their respective interests in baking and Darfur activism to provide a service that teaches student to bake challah and buy it fresh on campus, and in turn provides money for American Jewish World Services' humanitarian relief efforts in Sudan and Chad. The group raised over \$30,000 in under three years. Now a fellow at the PresenTense Institute, Winkelman is working full-time to bring Challah for Hunger—now a registered non-profit working on nearly 30 campuses to date—to students across the country and the world. The group has already gained recognition from the Clinton Global Initiative, and Winkelman also writes about Jews and food at The Jew and the Carrot blog.

In Brooklyn, the locavore movement is getting a delicious doughy boost from **Johanna Bronk**. An opera singer by training, Bronk, a recent conservatory graduate, spent time as an Adamah Fellow and discovered her love of baking. "I really learned about the importance of being connected to the food I consume," Bronk told Lilith. "I learned a lot about the Jewish connection to agriculture. Sometimes it feels like Jews have strayed from the land, but I want people to remember that throughout our history, we've really had a deep connection to it." So when she moved to New York, Bronk started what she calls a C.S.B.—like the now-common Community Supported Agriculture groups, but for baked goods (hence the "B"). Called A Needed Twist, the barely two-month-old project allows locals to "subscribe" for fresh baked challahs and other



bread made from all local ingredients (her wheat comes from Pennsylvania, and other ingredients grow even closer to home). "I certainly feel like it's a reflection of my Jewish identity," Bronk notes, adding, "After all, so much of observing Shabbat is about community. This is really an extension of that idea."

The idea of communal challah baking has been

taken up by groups ranging from the parents' association at the Abraham Joshua Heschel Hebrew day school in Manhattan to Russian women whom Project-Kesher is helping to resettle in Boston. Katja Goldman, who was one of the founders of a cooperative bakery in Cambridge, Mass. called The Slice of Life Bakery in the 1970s, and now teaches others to bake challah on Manhattan's Upper West Side, has spurred much of this activity.

"It's not part of an organized program. I was asked by Heschel and the JCC to teach challah classes, and they were auctioned off. I have been asked to teach challah-baking for many organizations now." So is her recipe special? "Everyone thinks her challah recipe is special. Mine has a honey glaze." *ONLINE: Challah recipes. Lilith.org/challah.*

MELANIE WEISS

Woman Wearing Tallit Arrested at Western Wall

This was the headline of a JTA dispatch on November 18, 2009. "Rabbi Shmuel Rabinovitch, the Western Wall rabbi, called the group's actions Wednesday 'an act of provocation that seeks to turn the Western Wall into disputed territory,'" the article reported. A medical student from Beersheba was arrested in what is apparently the very first enforcement of this sort to an "act of provocation" that has been going on for decades, both at Robinson's Arch and right at the Wall itself. Lilith is thrilled that all of Israel's social, political and military problems have receded to the point where this sort of enforcement is the best use of the country's time and resources. Good thing there's nothing else that needs fixing.

Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld of Washington D.C.'s Ohev Shalom—The National Synagogue, recently commented in a sermon to his congregation, "Recently, a woman was arrested for the crime of wearing a tallit—a prayer shawl—at the Western Wall... This woman who wore a tallit woke up that morning at 4:30 for the purpose of praying at the Wall. In the manner in which she prayed she was following the teachings of Rambam, Rabad, Tosafot, and the Chayyei Adam, and for doing so she was arrested. This is a colossal disgrace... And the government of Israel owes her an apology. From now on, when a woman comes to the kotel in a tallit let us recognize that one more mitzvah is being performed and so we are all one step closer to the Gates of heaven opening up completely."

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Pioneers in Helping Women Move On

Dissolving a Jewish marriage can be a fraught experience, not only because of the highly charged emotions involved, but also because of the particular strictures a Jewish divorce entails. Now there are women qualified to see you through the process.

Rabbi Chana Thompson Shor and **Rabbi Karen Reiss Medwed** are the first two women ever to be certified as *mesadrot gittin*, official arrangers/facilitators of a religious Jewish divorce. It's a highly specialized task, which requires counseling skills and expert knowledge of Jewish law, plus the ability to execute the very particular calligraphic requirements of a *get*, the Jewish bill of divorce. These two women have completed a course—offered for the first time in a generation by the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary—to train additional rabbis for this specific function.

Unlike the *ketubah*, the wedding contract, which can be ornamented and created as a blank form in advance, with names of bride, groom and witnesses filled in later, a *get* must be written by the arranging rabbi specifically on behalf the particular divorcing spouses and must follow a strict form of 12 lines, with spaces between the lines and some letters elongated to prevent additional words from being added in the spaces. Shor said “the main thing that makes writing a *get* to order difficult is adapting this strict form to an undetermined number of words. That is, I must write it in 12 lines exactly the same length, even if the groom's name is 'Asher Yisrael Zevulun who is known as Felix and who is also known as Sruli, son of Yerachme'el Gershon haLevy who is known as George and also known as Joe and as Joey' and the bride's name is 'Chaya Sheyna Batya who is known as Cheryl and as Cher, daughter of Mendel Zalman Ber Dov haKohen who is also known as Mendy and as Mike and as Moe.'”

The *get* is handed to the wife by the husband, then returned to the rabbi, who then cuts it to be sure it will not be re-used and stores it away. If the wife lives far away, part of the job of the facilitator of a Jewish divorce can include arranging for the delivery of the document to the wife. The *get* indicates that the woman is free to be with any other man, and that no one can tamper with this separation of the [former] spouses, which has taken place in accordance with the laws of Moses and Israel.

Bible scribe **Jen Taylor Friedman** (hasoferet.com/ritual/gittin.shtml), who wrote her own *get* when she divorced in 2008, demonstrates the writing style of a *get*. Fear not, the text she uses as her example here is a poem, not an actual *get*.

שחר אברהם צורי ומשגב
אשר יצאנו שחר וצורי
לפניך רבנו אברהם
לפניך רבנו צורי
כי עתה נראה כל מה שבת רבי

Friedman told Lilith “I really, really wanted to learn to write *gittin*, but the only place for women to learn in the USA seems to be a course open only to rabbis. I learned the minimum on my own, so that I could write my own *get* under supervision from a qualified *mesader gittin*.

And writing my own *get*—fantastic from a mishnah geekery point of view, given that the mishnah says *isha kotevet et githa* [“a woman writes her own *get*”]—was the most extraordinarily liberating experience. The ceremony is exceedingly passive, when you're the woman. It's you, your ex, and three other guys, and you don't have to do anything except take possession of the document—so being an active participant redressed the balance satisfactorily.”

NAOMI DANIS

“Coastie”— the New JAP Slur

Coastie
Always blowin' daddy's money
You a Coastie
My east coast Jewish honey

This is just one of several verses of a student-composed rap song and video making the rounds at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and on the Internet, where by mid-December it had attracted more than 10,000 listeners. It's a snide hit on out-of-state students from either coast, but in addition to the term's built-in xenophobia its lyrics are widely viewed as anti-Semitic. They certainly link Jewish women, in particular, to materialism.

When students posted comments suggesting that the song (and its accompanying video) were at the least “in poor taste,” others replied with remarks like “cry me a river” and a reference to “rich stuck-up Jewish girls.”

In a November article in the Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle, **Michelle A. Langer**, a sophomore at UW-Madison, correctly linked the term to its precursor, the JAP, or Jewish American Princess, a term deployed against Jewish women on campus since the 1980s. The accusations are almost identical, though the clothing labels have changed: materialism, economic privilege, and in Wisconsin in 2009, the wearing of Uggs and North Face. Never mind the shift in brands from the 1980s. The intent is the same: to insult Jewish women. And as with the JAP slur, there are real consequences. Langer describes harassment of Jewish female students at football games, where they've been cursed out as the term “Coastie” was hurled at them. The parallels to incidents on campus reported in Lilith 25 years ago are eerie.

There's more, of course. Just Google “Coastie.”

Susan Weidman Schneider

A Lilith Salon in Houston on Disabilities Activism

On a typical hot and muggy October evening, even the mother of all traffic snarls didn't deter 22 mainly estrogen-depleted, I.Q.-laden Houston women from participating in a Lilith salon focusing on special needs in the Jewish community. Hosted by Julia Wolf Mazow, the salon conversation was led by Sandra Block and Joan Alexander; each had played a critical role in developing the Alexander Institute of Jewish Family Service-Houston, to address the needs of people with developmental or functional limitations. Block had chaired the committee that uncovered the community's needs; Alexander is a philanthropist and activist whose interest brought the idea to reality in 2007.

Just planning the salon gathering was a consciousness-raiser, since even finding a home with an accessible front door turned out to be a challenge. Concern about physical accessibility in the Jewish community triggered other suggestions—ramps, of course, but also other accommodations we had not previously considered, such as having *mezuzot* lower on doorposts so those in wheelchairs can touch them. Of course not all special needs are physical. And the evening's conversation turned on needs often invisible in Jewish communities. One participant in the evening's Lilith salon (which has been meeting regularly since 2005) spoke of her autistic grandson and the dearth of local resources. And one woman's mother had started a foundation in her Texas home town for special needs Jewish children to receive specialized bar and bat mitzvah preparation so they too could celebrate these milestones.

What about activism on a systemic level? A documentary filmmaker related taking up the plight of a severely compromised young man who lost most of his state-funded care when he turned 21; she took the young man's fight to the Texas legislature. The talk moved from needs to the issue of stigma. Another salon participant recounted an incident during Yom Kippur services, when a bizarre-behaving man alarmed the congregation with a frightening outburst. The next day the rabbi, using the situation the worshippers had just experienced, called for compassion, understanding, tolerance, and inclusion for those with special needs.

Every Lilith salon feels special. But on this night, we ended our meeting with a *Schehecheyanu*. Each of us was inspired in some small way to be part of efforts to embrace all, no matter their ability and to ensure all voices be heard in and contribute to the richness of community.

TOBY MYERS

“A recent survey by The Forward of 75 major American Jewish communal organizations found that fewer than one in six are run by women, and that those women are paid 61 cents to every dollar earned by a man.

“If the Jewish community wants to continue to be vital, exciting and attractive to postmodern American Jews, then we have to make way for different voices to be heard in our leadership structure. We need Jewish leaders who are female, gay, black and Asian. This is our community now. The face of the Jewish community is literally changing more and more each year, and the leadership needs to reflect these changes.

“Frankly, the Jewish communal world needs to be shaken up. Now is the time to do it. The current economic crisis is an opportunity to turn old assumptions on their heads I am confident that we will benefit. I am also just as confident that we will lose very talented people to other communities and causes if we don't do this.”

From “Jewish community ignores female leaders at its peril,” a JTA op-ed by Rabbi Rebecca W. Sirbu, November 30, 2009. She is the director of Rabbis Without Borders at CLAL-The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership.

A ZIONIST IN SPITE OF HERSELF

Lilith catches up with Judith Shotten



At home on Kibbutz Hatzor, 1950

Barbara Gingold: Judy, let's pretend that we haven't been friends for many years, that I don't know that you recently celebrated your 85th birthday and your 60th year in Israel, that I never heard that you were the country's first qualified social worker, its first sex therapist, and one of the founders of its first clinic for feminist psychotherapy. Or that you just came home from an international conference and three weeks' touring in South America, followed by a week in a straw hut on a Sinai beach, then a national conference and weekend with friends on a kibbutz up north.

In front of me is an elegant woman of boundless energy who would look at home anywhere in the world, at a cocktail party for diplomats or studying tribal dances in the jungle—and, unlike me, is not in the least bit wilted by a 100-degree heat wave in Jerusalem in mid-October. What I'd like to know first is this: Whatever brought you to Israel?

Zionism was in her genes but not her head when, almost by accident, a young woman from Winnipeg found herself en route to the newly established State of Israel in 1949. Her two-week trip there turned into a lifetime. Judy Shotten has seen it all from the beginning: Israel's early socialism and contemporary corruption; the rise and fall of the kibbutz and the nascent cosmopolitanism of Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem; seven wars and the tentative pursuit of an elusive peace; the frauds of "egalitarianism" and the birth of Israeli feminism; the never-ending push-pull between the Jewish past and a more universal future. Social worker, psychologist and sex therapist, volunteer museum guide and Machsom (border checkpoint) Watcher, avid gardener and international backpacker with a long list of professional "firsts" to her credit, **Judy Shotten** is our own personal Israel archive, ever editing, changing, adding to what's been known and done. Now she tells Lilith reporter **Barbara Gingold** about her six decades of passionate engagement in and with the Jewish state.

Judy Shotten: I was brought up in a family whose total focus was Zionism. My father was born on the Baron de Hirsch colony in Saskatchewan [where Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe were sent to settle]. My mother was born in the Ukraine. When she was young, her family moved to Philadelphia, where they had wealthy relatives with ten sons. My mother became their "adopted" daughter, and they taught her the ways of the rich and elegant—which she would never have picked up in Galicia!

At the time, Winnipeg was one of the most dynamic Jewish communities in North America: ten percent of its 200,000 residents were Jewish. My mother's brothers left Philadelphia, put packs on their backs, peddled their way to Canada, and eventually brought my mother and the rest of the family there.

Meanwhile my father—like most of the poor Jews stuck on that agricultural settlement in the Canadian prairie with absolutely no knowledge of farming—left Saskatchewan for the

thriving Jewish community of St. Paul, Minnesota. When he finished college, Winnipeg was considered *the* Jewish place to be. He moved there, became a successful businessman, and married my mother, who made it quite clear that she had no intention of living in the city's crowded Jewish neighborhood. So they bought a house on the other side of town, where there were virtually no other Jews.

It was a bit ironic: my parents chose this *Judenrein* neighborhood, and they sent me to schools where I was the only Jew in my class, while they made it clear—though they never actually said it—that my non-Jewish classmates were not to be my social buddies. When I was 12, my mother—by then a very active and successful member of WIZO [the Women's International Zionist Organization]—pulled together a few other Jewish girls scattered through our part of town and organized a club for us: the “Pink Buds of Hadassah”!

It was kind of a schizoid existence: I had no idea that there was this incredibly vibrant Jewish community a streetcar away. (The streetcar was slow, and there was a lot of snow!) But at home in our totally non-Jewish neighborhood, we were having Zionism for breakfast and dinner. My father served as president of many local Jewish organizations. My grandmother ran our household. My mother, who was beautiful and bright, gifted and charismatic, wouldn't go to work, God forbid! It just wasn't done in her circles. So, with my father's admiration and support, she got into the charity world, rapidly rising through the ranks to become the national president of WIZO. Till then, all the organization's power had been concentrated in Montreal; she was its first president from “the boonies,” and the job was conditional on her spending two weeks a month at the WIZO office in Montreal—which she did. And every winter, both my parents would go off to warmer climes for at least a month while my brother and I were mostly left to the care of family maids. We didn't see much of our parents.

Gingold: Given this family history, it sounds like you could have taken a road opposite from your parents' Zionism.

Shotten: Yes. In retrospect: I resented my parents' busy lives and their unavailability. By the time I went to college, Zionism was coming out of my ears, and I'd had it with Winnipeg. But Canada was already at war in 1939, and it was unthinkable to leave home. There were only three fields open to girls at that time: teaching, social work, or nursing. So I got my degree in social work at a local college, where I joined the Fabian Society and discovered socialism, universalism, and all that. I became interested in what was going on in the world politically. Winnipeg was dull. I was restless. Finally, I went off to Montreal for an M.S.W. at McGill University. I was 19 and in the big city—it was large, cosmopolitan, French-speaking, and I loved it! And my studies, too. My field

Shotten's early attempts at being a pioneer on kibbutz, 1949.



work was in a psychiatric hospital, where I learned a bit about real life, probably not enough. By the time I graduated, I knew a lot more about leftism, anti-nationalism, and anti-imperialism. The British were leaving India, the Belgians were leaving the Congo, the whole world was changing—and immersed in that, I somehow didn't even notice the excitement surrounding the birth of Israel.

Gingold: This doesn't exactly sound like a superhighway to the new Jewish state.

Shotten: It wasn't. In 1949 I was wondering what to do with my life, and my mother invited me to go with her to Israel since my father

couldn't take off two or three months for the trip. Part of the deal was a visit to London and Paris, so I agreed. When we got to Marseilles and boarded the immigrant ship S.S. Kedma to Haifa in December, I was planning to spend just two weeks in Israel. But the weather was bad and the trip there took more than a week. There was lots of time to talk to people on the boat, mostly *olim* (new immigrants) from Morocco. My world suddenly opened up. I felt very, very humble, and guilty about my privileged life. That was my mood as we arrived in Israel.

Then my mother and I started visiting WIZO beneficiaries: hospitals, daycare centers, the *ma'abarot* [camps of tents and tin shacks that provided housing for new immigrants]. That winter was very hard—there was snow even in Tel Aviv and Beersheba, and those poor people living in the *ma'abarot* had no heating. My mother's WIZO colleagues—the only people I met—politely asked me what I do in Canada. When they heard that I had a degree and experience in social work, they said, “You can't leave! We need you.”

When you're 23 years old, that's a wonderful thing to hear. And just before my mother left Israel, I met a guy, a kibbutznik. I introduced him to her and announced that I was staying in Israel.

Gingold: Your mother was a major figure in the Canadian Zionist movement, but you were her only daughter. How did she feel about your staying in Israel?

Shotten: She was thrilled. I was living her dream! She would have stayed here herself, but my father wouldn't leave Canada. And my new boyfriend was from New York, the son of a Hadassah lady. He'd served in the War of Independence. What more could she want?!!!

Gingold: Being here in 1949 must have been an astounding adventure for a protected young woman from western Canada. What was it like?

Shotten: Well, I'd never even been in a youth movement. When I met him, my future husband, Elhanan, was living in a packing crate on his kibbutz near Gedera. There was no private property. No books. No art. Even your clothes weren't your own: you

took whatever came out of the communal laundry on Fridays. I had no intention of spending my life on a kibbutz. I went to an ulpan in Jerusalem to learn Hebrew, where I was one of the only North Americans; almost all the students were Mizrahi [Middle Eastern] men from the ma'abarot. After six months at the ulpan, I married Elhanan. He'd founded a factory on the kibbutz so they didn't want him to leave, but he used me as his excuse and we moved to Haifa.

There was a housing shortage, no place to live in the city. But my mother knew someone, a developer, with an apartment on the Carmel. He'd left the country suddenly, and we stayed there. It was a huge, four-room flat in the most elegant part of the city—totally bizarre and inappropriate! So we brought a colleague of mine, just out of Bratislava, to share the flat. Then one day some people knocked on our door claiming to be relatives of mine. I had no idea who they were, but we moved them into another room, and felt better about our living arrangements.

Gingold: Were you working then? Where did you start your working life in Israel?

Shotten: Youth Aliyah. An impossible and stupendous job. They were bringing in boatloads of kids every week, mostly from North

“In the 1950s and '60s the possibility of being a single mother never came up. There were no Israeli models of single mothers. If you became pregnant and weren't married, you had an abortion.”

Africa, but also from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Persia. Their parents were supposed to come later. The kids were put into reception centers for several months. They were taught 100 words of Hebrew, checked out medically, and placed into groups to go live on kibbutzim. Youth Aliyah had marvelous educational staff, but no social workers or psychologists. Someone had to help examine those kids, so they contracted a British psychologist in Jerusalem to find field workers. We were responsible for all the Youth Aliyah kids on kibbutzim from Rosh Hanikra down to Afikim and Pardes Hana. In our lousy Hebrew, we had to answer every S.O.S., administer non-verbal tests, and make our evaluations. An impossible job, but there was no one else to do it.

My marriage ended after four or five years, and I moved to Tel Aviv. It was the year of the polio epidemic, the winter of '56-'57. I found work at Tel Hashomer Hospital, where they'd never had a social worker before. I was the only non-medical person taking care of three children's pavilions, dealing with kids in iron lungs and their parents. After a year there, I found another job. Israel's health care system was run by the Histadrut, the Workers' Federation, and they asked me to help create the country's first mental health clinic. The staff consisted of two social workers, one psychologist, and one psychotherapist—the only ones in the country! I had a marvelous boss, and loved the job. In fact, I love working and have loved almost all my jobs.

Gingold: That was an era—the 1950s and '60s—when most middle class women in North America didn't work for pay.

In those early days, what struck you about Israeli women?

Shotten: When I came here, I was so proud of what I thought of as equality: everyone had nothing. In the kibbutzim, women were working! Compared to what I'd seen in middle-class Jewish Canada, this was incredible equality. Israel was a wonderful place to me because I identified with its socialist ideals, the whole value system. And there was also hope. All my anti-nationalism and universalism went out the window.

Today, society here has been turned around, and like many others I feel sad, very sad, without much hope for the future. It's a great sense of disappointment. But in those days, our innocence was unbelievable. We didn't ask questions. What did I know about Arab society? And if I'd had questions, who would I have asked? And then we had Golda Meir. We made fun of her, we knew she did nothing for women, but she was a woman who'd made it to the top.

Gingold: When did you start asking questions?

Shotten: Some time after the Six-Day War. The Women's Movement started here around 1973. A women's bookstore was opened in Jerusalem. And consciousness-raising groups. People talked about lesbianism openly and freely for the first time. We'd heard about all this before, but it was very exciting when it first came here. I remember seeing Betty Friedan in Jerusalem at one of the first feminist women's conferences [in 1984]. She and Alice Shalvi led a big public protest in front of the King David Hotel, demanding that Israel's [male] political leaders

recognize women's rights. It was such a unifying, watershed moment for Israeli women, and it marked the beginning of the Israel Women's Network.

Gingold: What were the major achievements of the women's organizations in those days?

Shotten: Oy! A whole ten years after that women's protest, when we were establishing the Counseling Center for Women—the country's pioneering feminist therapy clinic—the word 'feminism' was still a no-no. Lots of hostility and anger were being directed at feminists. We spent a whole year at CCW debating whether or not to use the 'f-word' in our first brochure!

Gingold: What was it in Israel that made feminism particularly threatening?

Shotten: In the beginning, the kind of thinking we were programmed with as we grew up made it hard for American women to stomach feminism, and I think it was the same for Israelis. In those years, women in Israel were serving in the army and going out to work. We thought that that meant we already had an egalitarian society. I blame this on the Histadrut, the Labor Federation, which managed to sell this story to the whole nation. Women didn't grasp the fact that they weren't getting the good jobs, equal salaries, equal perks, and so on. In the '50s and '60s, Israelis were convincing themselves that they were superior to North America—and maybe in some ways, in our poverty, we were.

Gingold: In addition to its egalitarian image, Israel had a reputation in those days as a land of free love. When I got here in the late '60s, though, after college and the sexual revolution in the U.S., I got the impression that Israeli women were more puritanical than their American sisters.

Shotten: Quite right. The Jewish tradition of early marriage was still very strong in Israel in the '50s and '60s; most young people were married by 21 or 22. The sexual revolution only arrived in the '70s, along with feminism. By then all my "Anglo-Saxon" friends in Jerusalem, like their Israeli contemporaries, had been married for years.

Gingold: But you were divorced in the mid-'50s, and had been living the single life for about two decades. What was that like in such a totally married society?

Shotten: Very difficult! For some years after my divorce I was depressed, and desperate most of the time to find a partner and have kids. Divorce has become so common since the '60s and '70s, but in the 1950s, no one else in my peer group in Winnipeg

"I think I'd always know there was a feminist approach to psychology, but as a woman I'd never had any confirmation of the things I was experiencing sexually."

was divorced. I'm sure my mother was ashamed of me. Not that she ever discussed it with me. She was busy.

Divorce made me feel different, a failure. I sensed that I'd made a bad decision: I hadn't recognized the person my husband really was.

I don't know why I didn't remarry sooner. There were guys available in Israel, and I'd date them for a few months, but they never seemed appropriate to marry. Maybe because they usually weren't North Americans, and we had cultural differences.

I'm sorry I had no children, of course. It would have made for a totally different life, much richer in human relationships. But at the time, the possibility of being a single mother never came up. There were no Israeli models of single mothers. If you became pregnant and weren't married, you had an abortion.

Gingold: What led you to become a sex therapist?

Shotten: For about a decade in the '50s and '60s, I trained at the Israel Institute of Freudian Psychoanalysis in Jerusalem. In 1970, I was asked to help set up the Hebrew University's first psychology clinic. It was meant just for overseas students, but in 1973, everyone was so stressed by the Yom Kippur War that we opened it to all students. I adored my job.

I'd also been in private practice for a long time, mostly women clients. Many of the women I treated brought their sex problems to me. But my training had been psychoanalytic, and I didn't have the skills to help them. Sex therapy was a new field, still totally unknown in Israel. So in 1975 I decided to go study it at Berkeley.

Gingold: What did you bring back with you from the West Coast?

Shotten: I think I'd always known there was a feminist approach to psychology, but as a woman I'd never had any confirmation of the things I was experiencing sexually. I sensed there was another way [than the strictly psychoanalytic], but didn't have the confidence to say: "This is how to deal psychologically with these issues—sexual arousal, orgasm, and so forth. How to understand them physiologically, inter-personally, and socially. How to understand lesbianism differently." That's what it was all about at Berkeley.

When I got back to Hebrew University, I told my boss I'd learned about all these new things—women's groups, consciousness-raising, etc. He told me, "Forget it—Israeli women aren't going to come to a group to talk about their sex lives!" I said, "Let's try it."

Our first groups were called "Non-Orgasmic Women's Groups," and women flocked to them! They were so exciting that I started doing them privately, too. I also started doing couple therapy, working with a male psychologist. He treated the men, I treated the women.

Since I was the first to do anything like this in Israel, I got a lot of publicity—they put me on radio and TV, I was written up in the newspapers. I became known as a fighter for women's sexual rights, and that's how the collective of women who were starting the non-profit Counseling Center for Women found me. When it was established in the '80s, C.C.W. was the only clinic in Israel offering feminist therapy, and much of it was subsidized so that low-income women could afford it. There were many other groups like this being established in the U.S. and England at the time, but today C.C.W. is one of the very few left that's still functioning—and thriving.

I also met my husband, Aaron in Berkeley, and when I came back to Israel in '75 he came with me.

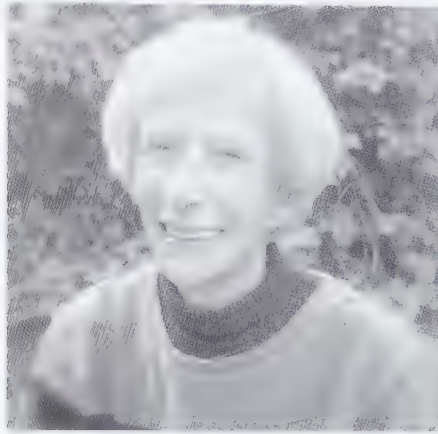
Gingold: You'd been single for a long time by then. Did that affect your relationship?

Shotten: No, I was lucky. Aaron was a man who'd also been alone for a long time after his divorce. He needed his space and I needed mine, so it was a happy arrangement. If either of us had found a partner who was dependent, it would've created difficulties. Though we had shared cultural and intellectual interests, we also had our own pathways. I was working at the University; he spent his time going to every class and lecture he could find in English on Judaism.

Gingold: Speaking of Judaism, were you ever involved in organized religion here?

Shotten: Aaron was raised in a Jewish home in Far Rockaway, New York. He pretty much left his Jewishness behind when he served in the U.S. army and then went to U.C.L.A. for his Ph.D. He lived in a very non-Jewish environment for a long time, but he had a Jewish soul and was starved for Judaism. I had no connection to religion in Israel, and we never joined a synagogue. We tried to establish a Jewish Humanism Society in Jerusalem, but it never really took off.

When Aaron died about 12 years ago, I couldn't deal with my head. I sought something more reflective than organized Judaism, and found meditation and Buddhism. I belong to a meditation group and go to meditation retreats here and in India. Buddhism



Above: Shotten on kibbutz, 1950. Top left: On the road with Youth Aliyah, 1950. Left: Judy Shotten, October 2009, photographed by Barbara Gingold

keeps repeating all the time: “Be aware, be centered in the now, because you can’t do anything about the past and don’t know what will be in the future.” It has added enormously to my life.

Gingold: You seem to have had just about everything that most women of your generation merely dreamt about—adventure, romance, professional success. Is there anything you’ve missed?

Shotten: You forgot to mention that I also had cancer. My first surgery, a mastectomy, was 23 years ago.

Gingold: Every woman’s nightmare. As always, you turned that experience into something positive: you helped found another Israeli non-profit, One in Nine, to serve women with cancer. But how did the mastectomy affect you personally?

Shotten: I had to work on myself to feel good about my body—there were no “body people” in Jerusalem then. People helped me—my husband, of course, first of all—and I had all these adventures. My first hiking experience was about two months after my surgery. Aaron and I had gone to Berkeley, as we did every summer, and his cousin, a real sportswoman, invited us on a hike. At the edge of a deserted lake, we put up our tent, and this cousin announced that we’d all go swimming at dawn. Well, in the middle of the night a group of Boy Scouts showed up, and there they were at the edge of the lake when we woke up. We had no bathing suits. I hesitated, then decided to dive in

anyway. That was when I realized that the mastectomy made no difference. When you’re a hiker, living rough—you realize that it [your missing breast] is not relevant any more, you just put your pack on your back and go. That really helped me.

Gingold: You recently had another mastectomy—more than twenty years after the first. Was it as difficult the second time?

Shotten: It’s actually amazing—it’s now six months since my last surgery, and it’s liberating—without breasts you can wear these gorgeous strapless dresses. I’ve totally forgotten I ever had breasts. They’re just gone. Gone! And I’ve written a funny story about a one-breasted adventuress.

Gingold: Judy, you must know that you’re a powerful role model for me and many of our friends. You have endless intelligence, curiosity, humor, openness, commitment, energy, gumption. How can we foster your traits in ourselves and in our children? In other words—how can we be like you?!!!

Shotten: I was lucky. I always had enough energy—I inherited it from my mother—and money to see the world. The rest of those traits—I just think they’re inborn. I’m very aware, all the time, of how grateful I am. It took many years and some living to get to this point, to recognize my good fortune. And I was lucky for another reason: to satisfy my innate curiosity about everything, my excitement at new and different experiences, there’s no place like Israel that could have made all this possible! ■

What Was a Nice Jewish Girl Like Me Doing in a *Man's* Body?

*A transgendered woman remembers
his painful search.*

by JOY LADIN

A MAN IS STANDING IN THE SHOWER. It's the weekend, it's Saturday, it's sunny, he's in his thirties, his early forties, taking a long hot weekend shower, listening to his family—first one child, then another, then three together—screaming happily with their mother.

Some part of the man is glowing, far away, or far below, or somewhere within. This glow is happiness, he tells himself. There is another feeling too, a burning sensation, a white-hot flame defying the cold, numb element—him—that threatens to smother it. That's love, he tells himself. He is burning with love for his family, glowing with happiness at the sound of their happiness, and yet he is far away, or far below, or somewhere within. These are among the strongest feelings he has ever had, and yet he cannot feel them.

Eventually the man gets out of the shower. The happiness, the love, the pain—so intertwined he can't imagine one without the others—recede to livable levels. He settles back into his sleeve of numbness: skin, shirt, trousers. He knows this is a good

life, the very best life he can permit himself to imagine. And some day, he promises himself, this good life will finally be over.

There are reasons for his despair. The sex of the body he was given is at odds with the gender of what therapists might call his psyche, and religious people might call his soul. He calls it his “self,” and although it is faint, formless, without a life or a body to live in, it is the only part of him that has ever felt real. He knows that this absence of feeling, this unreality, and the ache and desire for death that accompany it, are called “gender dysphoria.” He knows that gender dysphoria has always been with him; he knows it will never go away.

What he doesn't know is that every day that he fails to live that unrealized self, his gender dysphoria will grow worse. Harder to live with. More costly to ignore.

I WAS NINE OR TEN WHEN I LEARNED THAT, according to the Torah, God has a deep aversion to the transgendered: “*A woman must not put on man's apparel, nor shall a man wear women's clothing; for whoever does these things is abhorrent*



As long as men and women stayed on their own sides of their closets, God would not abhor us.

to the Lord your God" [Deut. 22:5]. Though far from Orthodox, I couldn't ignore this sentence. For one thing, it was the only time the Torah—or Judaism—acknowledged the existence of transgendered people like me. For another, I understood how God felt. Despite the conflict between the body that proved I was male and the unshakeable sense that I was female, I longed for the simplicity that the yin and yang of gender dimorphism seemed to promise. If everyone was simply male or simply female, then perhaps every act was simply good or simply evil; every answer simply yes or simply no; every life simply empty or simply full. A binary world, a world in which I couldn't exist, would be infinitely clearer. As long as men and women stayed on their own sides of their closets, God would not abhor us.

Despite my longing and the law, both God and I knew that I was sometimes going to wear female clothes, so I kept looking for a loophole. I was a child, not a man; perhaps the law didn't apply to children. But codes of masculinity and femininity were as strictly enforced in my family and school as in Moses' Bronze Age wilderness. My sister's wardrobe and mine had noth-

ing in common. Abhorrence of gender transgression was all around me, in the people I loved, in the air I breathed—in myself. I didn't *want* to transgress gender boundaries; but I wanted—I needed—to be a girl.

Perhaps that was how I could convince God not to abhor me for sneaking up to the attic and stuffing myself into my sister's outgrown skirts. I wasn't a male or a female; I was a transsexual. Either I had no gender to transgress, because my female self and male body canceled each other out, or the law was inoperative because I had no way *not* to transgress it. Whether I wore male clothing or female clothing, I was always in some way cross-dressed.

That sounded right to me, but what were the chances that a God revolted by cross-dressing would bother to sort out my gender? God would abhor first and ask questions later. After all, that's what I did, when I saw myself not through the lens of my long-

ings but in terms of my behavior. Obviously, I shouldn't wear girl's clothing; it was wrong, it was stupid, and no matter how much I wanted it to, it would never transform me into the girl I was supposed to be.

And yet there I was, again and again, cross-dressing. It didn't matter how much God abhorred me for doing it. I couldn't stop. Maybe that was the loophole I was looking for. Starving Jews are allowed to eat non-kosher food. I was starving to be a girl, and the non-kosher food of female clothing was the only way I knew to feed my malnourished self. Perhaps the law really meant, "God will abhor you for cross-dressing, unless you are dying to do it." After all, God had made me a boy who was dying to be a girl. How could God abhor me for being what I was made to be?

Unfortunately, neither God nor I were comfortable with the claim that my desire to be female constituted a revelation that superseded Torah. I knew that overwhelming desire to do an abhorrent thing didn't make the thing permissible. Maybe I wasn't a basically good child doing an abhorrent thing; maybe I myself was abhorrent.



Jay Ladin



Joy Ladin

THE LAW IN DEUTERONOMY WASN'T CUTTING ME

off from God; it was showing me that God and I had something in common. We could abhor me together.

Despite God's Deuteronomic disgust, like many transkids, I spent nights bargaining with God. In exchange for becoming myself, I offered God... terrible things. I don't care, I whispered to the silence, whatever you want I'll give you—just let me wake up different.

If God keeps old prayers, there must be a special section for those of transsexual children. Strange prayers, prayers that precede overdoses of pills and crudely knotted nooses, prayers ravishing in their loneliness: *You made me what I am; You, at least, must understand.*

How, I wondered, could such prayers fail to evoke a response from God? It didn't seem like that much to ask. The only difference, after all, was a little bit of flesh between my legs. I would get out of bed in the morning and standing would be different—my feet would feel the floor, and my hair would be longer, a tickling tumble over my shoulders, and I would stand up straighter, and I would open my door and pad in my new but not so different flesh across the hall to show my parents what had happened—what I had become—what I had always been....

And then my life would begin.

Except that it never did. I was trapped; God, like a righteous or sadistic jailer, could, but wouldn't, set me free.

I WISH MY CHILDHOOD WRESTLINGS WITH GOD

had prepared me for a life of indomitable determination to triumph over every obstacle until I became the woman I knew I was meant to be. Everyone loves that story, and many transsexuals and non-transsexuals live it. I didn't. I did everything I could to give up on life. Instead of struggling heroically against the rejection, hatred and ignorance that surrounds transsexuality, I devoted myself to quarantining and killing my desperate craving to become.

But though I tried for decades, I never managed to die inside. Against my will, beneath my awareness, life grew inside me, shower by despair-soaked shower. My life, the life that would include me. The life that would require me to make the unimaginable transition from living as a man to living as a woman. The life that would cost me all I knew of life.

My suffering is no more important than the suffering of my life-partner and children, whose lives have been shattered by my transition from living as a man to living as a woman.

Rabbi Hillel crystallized the transsexual dilemma two thousand years ago. "*If I am not for myself,*" he said, "*who will be for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I?*" I and other transsexuals know that if we are not for ourselves, if we are not committed to becoming ourselves, no one will be for us. No one expects us to become ourselves, no one needs us to become ourselves, and those whose lives are bound up with ours—in my case, my wife, my three children, my best friend, my employer, my students—would be much happier if we never became ourselves. Our journey toward selfhood can only begin with a radical act of being-for-ourselves that can seem selfish, solipsistic, even psychotic, for we are being for selves that do not yet exist. But if we are not for ourselves, our selves will never be.

Sometimes it seems that this radical being-for-ourselves seals our isolation, our differentness, from the rest of the human race. But Hillel's follow-up question applies as much to us as to anyone. *If we are for ourselves alone, what are we?* For years, I tried to treat my peculiar gender—a gender defined by the dissonance between my physical sex and my internal sense of self—as a private, idiosyncratic condition. I could be myself, I told myself, if I could be for myself alone. But Hillel was right. When I was for myself alone, what was I? A wish, a longing, a perversion. To become myself, I needed to be for, with, among others. "Female" designates a physical condition; "woman" designates a social status, someone who has achieved a mature female identity in the world. Since my genes determined that I could never be female, to become a woman I had to engage in a process of becoming that was neither private nor idiosyncratic, to remake myself as a woman in the eyes of those who knew me as a man.

But if I cannot be for myself alone, if I need others to become myself, then I cannot ignore the pain that results from my becoming. However much I've suffered, my self and my life are no more important than the suffering selves of the life-partner and children whose lives have been shattered by my transition from living as a man to living as a woman. The best moments of the life I am making will always be intertwined with the worst moments of the lives of those I love. It isn't fair; it isn't what I want or intend; but it is true. What can I make of myself—what self can I make, what service can I do, what love can I give, that would in any way be worth such pain? If I am not for myself alone, what, other than a source of anguish, am I?

TRANSSEXUALS' FATE IS TO CONFRONT OTHERS

with the fact that since we are all complicit in each other's identities, none of us are, or can be, for ourselves alone. Transsexuals are constant reminders that neither gender nor identity is "in" us. Who we are for ourselves is constantly being remade through what we are to others.

Life as a transsexual is tough enough without serving as a public proving ground for existential insecurities. But the fact that I tend to destabilize the sense of gender and identity of those around me means that, no matter how isolated I feel, I am not for myself alone. What I am is part of what you are; I define you as you define me. My journey from shame-soaked depths to the clothes-wearing, job-holding light of day involves everyone around me.

Truly, I couldn't have made, or continue to make, this journey to the surface without you. ■

Joy (formerly Jay) Ladin, David and Ruth Gottesman Professor of English at Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University, is the first openly transgender employee of an Orthodox Jewish institution. Ladin is the author of three books of poetry from Sheep Meadow Press: Alternatives to History (as Jay Ladin); The Book of Anna (as J. Ladin); and the just-published Transmigration, her first book under her true name. A book of original psalms is forthcoming from Wipf & Stock Press in 2010. This essay is drawn from a yet-unpublished collection of autobiographical reflections; these reflections have also spawned stories in Parnassus: Poetry in Review and Prairie Schooner. Ladin is the proud, problematic parent of Gabriel, 15; Yael, 10; and Nasia, 6.

Author's Note: I started writing psalms because I was in crisis; I felt shipwrecked with God, in a narrow space where God and I had no choice but to face each other. This psalm explores how hard it is for two such different beings to empathize with one another.

Psalm 6

God, you're lost in me again.

I've grown too large, too hollow

For you to follow

The breadcrumbs of Being you dropped

As you wandered

My intestinal dark. Your voice echoes inside me

From ceilings you can't reach

Because you are a child again, an unborn child

With no womb to curl in

And no way out

But crawling deeper in. At times like these

You regret the love

That lured you into the sticky mess

Of creation. And then, and only then,

You remember your wish

To understand

How the creatures you love so much

Could ever wonder where you are

When you are all around us.

—from Joy Ladin's forthcoming book, *Psalms*.

Becoming a Woman at Yeshiva University

IT WASN'T EASY FOR YESHIVA University to accept that a male professor to whom it had recently given tenure was returning to work as a female professor. Transsexual transition is problematic for most employers, and Yeshiva's status as Orthodox Judaism's flagship educational institution made my transition even more difficult. At first, I was placed on involuntary—and open-ended—research leave; I continued receiving full salary and benefits, but was not allowed on campus. Though this would be a dream-come-true for most academ-

ics, discrimination hurts, and I missed my students and the joy of teaching at Stern. When, after almost a year of leave, I sent a letter demanding to be allowed to return to work, to my surprise—and that of my Lambda Legal attorneys—the school agreed. My return to teaching in Fall 2008 made page 3 of the New York Post and precipitated discussion throughout the Jewish world, but, to my surprise, stirred little controversy among my students and colleagues—suggesting that attitudes toward gender and identity may be more flexible than the official positions

of conservative institutions suggest.

The most important consequence of my transition, in terms of students at Stern, was the publication of an issue of the student newspaper, *The Observer*, devoted to transsexuality and Judaism. This groundbreaking issue included a variety of Jewish views of transsexuality, and, in what is to the best of my knowledge a first, interviews with transgendered Jews living in hiding in Orthodox Jewish communities. I feel proud and lucky to work with the young women at Stern.

—Joy Ladin

WHEN FOOD



Aaron and I lingered at the buffet table, enormous bowls of pasta salad and vegetables spread out in front of us. The event celebrated the purchase of a pre-World War II Torah that had been recently rescued from its hiding spot in the basement of an old synagogue in Romania.

"It's funny, that guy over there just asked if we were dating," I mentioned, as I reached for some tortellini with pesto. "It's not the first time I've heard that question. Earlier this week, someone asked me the same thing."

"Well, it's not like I haven't thought about it," he replied idly as he scooped carrot salad onto a paper plate.

I stopped mid-spoonful, frozen. I hadn't expected that response. "I—I don't think now is the best time to talk about this," I said.

He shrugged and said, "Why not?" without looking up from the food.

"Well, I've been thinking about it, too," I said carefully, which froze him as well. Carrot salad ignored, he looked over at me.

"Maybe you're right," he said slowly, "maybe this isn't the best time to talk about it."

That moment at the buffet table marked a change in our relationship. But it was only the latest food marker in our time together. Food had originally been part of what kept us apart.



LOVE COLLIDE

by CYNTHIA GRABER

We're both Jewish. We often go to the same service to pray, a minyan that pushes the boundaries of the Orthodox movement by allowing women to lead parts of the service. But unlike me, Aaron keeps Shabbat. And he keeps kosher. Strictly.

To my mind, I do keep kosher. I grew up with separate meat and milk dishes. I don't eat pork or shellfish and, if I were to eat meat, would only eat kosher meat. My dishes are all vegetarian and have never been used for any meat meal. But this wasn't enough for him. I don't look for a *hekhsher* on everything I buy, so he wouldn't eat food cooked in my kitchen. If he eats hot, cooked food out of his house, he only eats it in strictly kosher homes and restaurants.

We'd known each other for years. For the past six months, we'd been spending a great deal of time together, going out regularly to a neighborhood bar to catch some bluegrass, grabbing a beer and discussing our love lives. When we'd talked about dating (other people, of course, not each other), I said I couldn't date someone who wouldn't eat out at a restaurant with me. He said he'd never date someone who ate at non-kosher restaurants, as she'd expect the same of him.

And yet I knew I was playing with fire as I increasingly invited him to join me at events around town. I loved talking

with him. I wanted to hear his opinions. I wanted to see his huge smile and enjoy his quick wit, his ability to find a come-back to any taunt, or a random piece of information to complement any topic. Suddenly I realized I had a problem: I was falling in love.

A week after the encounter at the buffet table, we went out on our first official date. He took me to sushi: he could eat the fish (uncooked), but wouldn't eat the rice (cooked). The sake slid down our throats, spicy and sweet. We moved on to coffee (hot drink—not a problem, as it's prepared in its own container), and he took my hand, stroking my palm. Chills flew up my spine. When he kissed my fingers I knew it was time to leave the restaurant.

Despite the food barrier, we tumbled into the relationship with a speed and intensity that belied our religious differences. I suddenly, shockingly, had a boyfriend who could not take me out to dinner, except, generally, at one of a couple of local kosher restaurants. So instead, we cooked—at his house. We'd stop off at the supermarket and pick up whatever looked good, frying up tofu and vegetables, ad-libbing sauce for pasta, covering our hands in sticky fruit juice for mango and black beans. We grabbed left-over vegetables in the morning and threw them in a pan with eggs and spices. He said he'd rarely eaten so well.

Before we started dating, Aaron insisted it didn't matter that he could basically only eat raw vegetables at non-kosher restaurants. "I can't tell the difference between good and bad cooking, so I don't mind."

I quickly learned that was a lie, or at least a necessary delusion. I'd hold out the spoon while cooking and he'd sip it, wait a moment, then pronounce what should be added—lemon juice, salt, hot pepper, cumin. I trusted his taste. I called him a closeted foodie.

One Friday night we invited a half-dozen friends over for Shabbat dinner. We spent the afternoon in the kitchen. He played sous-chef as I called out the steps for the recipes. The sauce for the fish bubbled on the stove as he smashed pistachios to go in the quinoa and I diced an array of jewel-toned vegetables for an Israeli salad. We carried the vibrant platters out to our guests in celebration of the gusto with which we'd performed this dance of domesticity. I surveyed the table with pride, relishing our shared culinary adventures, our love of food and community.

But I missed sharing other food experiences with him. I thought about visiting a close friend later that summer, and how she wouldn't be able to cook him her Armenian crusty rice or

example, having a kitchen that would meet his *kashrut* standards. But I would also need to know that he could find a way to be more flexible, a way to allow space for my values, too, in any future family we might create together. He listened, but he didn't say anything, unwilling or unsure of how to answer.

At times I called my friends in a panic. "I love him," I'd say, "but how will I know when it's time to break up?"

Finally, over a beer one summer night, he decided it was time. He said that he looked into the future, and he saw struggles ahead, and he didn't think he was ready to take them on.

Dating Aaron made me examine the ways in which I'm willing to compromise. I already limit my diet by choice, and it's not always easy. I can practically taste the rich aroma of my friend's favorite lamb dish at a local upscale Mediterranean restaurant. After a week in Madrid, the rosy glow of cured ham tempts like a beacon from its premium spot on the wall of my favorite neighborhood tapas joint.

And yet within my chosen restrictions, the small window of flexibility allows me an opening to the world. I can eat anywhere, even if my options are limited. My friends can share their love for



I said I couldn't date someone who wouldn't eat out. He said he'd never date someone who ate at non-kosher restaurants.

whip up a vegetable stew. I regretted that I couldn't introduce him to the salty sweet vegetarian kibbeh at my favorite Middle Eastern hole-in-the-wall, or the earthy, locally foraged mushrooms at a neighborhood French bistro.

Then, I started to think about traveling. And food.

I leave the country at least once a year. I've sipped soup with a Thai monk, dived into a hot fish taco with Mexican fishermen, gorged on rice and avocado salad after a day of hiking in Peru. How could we travel together?

And then I began to worry about children—and food. What if we got married and had kids? What if he didn't want his kids, our kids, to eat at my friends' houses?

As the months passed, we talked about our differences in religion, and the conversations forced a number of tough questions to the surface, questions about our different views on the role of women in the synagogue, about Shabbat observance. I told him that I could see changing my life in some ways, living a life more tightly bound by Jewish strictures. I was willing to consider, for

me by sharing their food. I celebrate the play of an endless variety of flavors and textures that melt onto my tongue and fill not only my body, but my soul. I know this experience will be a part of what I will share with a life partner. Together we will teach our children that they can wander the world freely, experiencing the tastes of cultures and the joy of new friends from any background.

The relationship's end left me sad. I felt frustrated that two committed Jews who love each other couldn't bridge the Jewish distance between us. Yet I understood that to Aaron, the rules of Judaism form the basis of his life. And being with him helped me realize that my decision to approach food with greater flexibility is not simply based on laziness, or an addiction to restaurants. It's part of my life philosophy, as much a part of it as Judaism. I savor the freedom of being able to sit down with anyone, anywhere, and break bread. ■

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IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS THIS: FAT

...AND THEN I STARTED CUTTING

by MARNI GROSSMAN

"BEHOLD," MY ARMS CRY, "MY BOURGEOIS PAIN!" HARK, MY NARCISSISM!" THE BLOODY GASHES WEEP WITH MELODRAMATIC INTENSITY, DRAWN BY AN ANGST-RIDDEN AUTHOR, STROKED INTO BEING BY A SURE ARTIST'S HAND. MY ARMS ARE LIKE A JACKSON POLLOCK PAINTING, I SAY. SEEMINGLY RANDOM, THE MARKS HAVE BEEN APPLIED WITH PAINSTAKING PRECISION. POLLOCK APPLIED HIS PAINT NOT WITH BROAD SWATHS, BUT CAREFUL DRIPS. I APPLY MINE WITH A STEADY GRIP AND THE MOST PRECISE OF TOOLS. POLLOCK WORKED WITH A BROODING INTENSITY, UNABLE TO SEE BEYOND THE TASK AT HAND. I WORK FEVERISHLY, TOO, MIND NUMB TO EVERYTHING BUT THE BLADES AND THE BLOOD. HIS PALETTE WAS NEVER PARTICULARLY VARIED AND NEITHER IS MINE. SHADES OF PURPLE, ECHOES OF WHITE, SALMON. RED.

IN ACTUALITY, MY SCARS HAVE BEGUN TO FADE. THEIR THEATRICAL POWER IS BEING EATEN AWAY BY HUNGRY FLESH, BY GREEDY TIME.

I WAS SUCH A GOOD GIRL. Really I was. Good grades, good behavior. Good hygiene.

Until fifteen, anyway. At which point I stopped eating. I dropped my fork with a clatter and, with my other hand, I picked up the razor.

In the beginning, there was this: fat. The three-letter word that seemed to encompass everything that was wrong. Not just my thighs or my stomach, but my soul. I was ugly and fat and stupid and worthless. All day long the words rattled around my brain, lodging in the nooks and crannies and taking up residence there.

I was never much good at starving. Never thin enough or hungry enough or dizzy enough. I was, I thought, half-assing it. *Just like everything else: epic fail.* This was a source of great shame. I couldn't even starve myself properly. Eighty eight pounds was thin, maybe, but it wasn't success. Not by a long shot. Later,



though, I found something I was good at: cutting. And, for a time, that was enough.

I was sixteen the day I first cut myself, and I'd gone out with friends. I'd ordered salad and pushed it around with my fork, willing myself not to eat the croutons. Or so I recall. Maybe that is something I've remembered wrongly. I remember going to the movies. Coming home. Picking up the razor from its place on top of the shower. Carving away at my arm. Beads of blood. Getting caught.

Explaining myself required some fast thinking and fancy footwork. But I did it. It was easy to lie to my mother. I was doing it for her own protection.

But these are just details. Accessories. The real story was somewhere else. Beneath my skin.

WHAT I REALLY REMEMBER IS THIS: that each slice of the skin, each jab at the arm, felt like nothing so much as a caress.

It didn't hurt. Not really. And even if it did, I deserved it. That's what I felt. Who was I to complain? To hurt? There were, I knew, people out there with Real Problems. It killed me to be so self-centered.

Soon I would discover that the Bic razor, with which I'd started cutting, was too clunky, too big a brush to paint my masterpieces. And it didn't give me *rivers* of burgundy flowing from lily-white wrists, showy expressions of my despair, elegant declarations of sorrow, physical manifestation of the war brewing in my adolescent brain. And so I graduated to single blades, purchased in packs of ten. I bought them at the drugstore with

issues of Vogue. I began on my stomach but quickly moved on to bigger and better canvases. The scars became deeper and redder, inching out from my torso to my upper arms and ending halfway past the elbow. I consumed countless tissue boxes in my quest for mental health. And-oh-so-many yards of medical tape. I stained many sets of sheets. A brand-new comforter.

No, the cutting didn't hurt. Not really. It was everything else, every other moment, that stung.

THERE ARE PEOPLE STARVING IN AFRICA.

My mother used to say that when I was small and wouldn't finish my dinner.

There are people starving in Africa.

Starving Africans, I felt certain, would see me for what I really was: a narcissist of the highest order. Someone with incomprehensible luxuries: to self-starve, to self-mutilate, to self-loathe. To mortify, like a good Catholic saint. But I was just a nice Jewish girl. A nice Jewish girl faking it.

What I wanted was to be entirely selfless. Without need. To give and give and never complain.

If I cut, I could contain everything. Then no one would ever know that I was someone plagued with selfish thoughts. That I was weak in this way. I could run the razor across my arm and feel so much better. Like I'd articulated everything without uttering a word. Like I'd gotten what I deserved.

I could run the razor across my arm and then get on with the business of Being Good. I could run the razor across my arm and then get up and study for my U.S. History A.P. I could smile and laugh and play the role expected of me. I could say nothing and hurt no one and I could be perfect. Or, at any rate, I could seem perfect.

I WASN'T PERFECT, THOUGH. In fact, I was a sinner. Because it turned out that Jewish law prohibits self-injury. The verse is Deuteronomy 14:1—"Ye are the children of the Lord your God: ye shall not cut yourselves, for thou art a holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be His own treasure out of all peoples that are upon the face of the earth." A teacher at Gratz Hebrew High School had told me that. In a class on Jewish law. He went on to speculate about the motivations of those sorts of people. Cutters, that is. I didn't hear him because my heart was beating too fast and the din in my head was reaching new volumes. The conclusion was unassailable, though: God hates me, too.

But if I was a bad Jew, I was still a good woman. A perfect specimen of femininity.

Anorexia, cutting—these are overwhelmingly female diseases. Women are supposed to be self-sacrificing, to swallow our needs, to bury our anger. Self-harm is what happens when these "feminine" traits are taken to their extremes. Self-injury

felt like an understandable response to a world in which women are perceived as weak for having feelings, trivial and selfish if we so much as have needs. The psychopathology of a self-injurer stems, at least in part, from the requirements of the cultural construction of femininity.

We female cutters are merely doing *too* well what all women are expected to do very well.

I TOLD MY MOTHER, FINALLY, DURING AN ARGUMENT. Summer was coming and I couldn't wear long sleeves *all* the time. My hometown in Delaware is hot and sticky in the summer, humidity driving heat indices ever upward.

So, in a characteristically idiotic fashion, I hurled the cutting at her, aiming to wound. Maximizing the moment's dramatic potential, I rolled up my sleeve and thrust my arm in her face. "You-didn't-even-know-about-*this*," I said. You didn't even know about this. I regretted it as soon as I said it.

I couldn't take it back, though. Just like I couldn't take back the red and white and pink graffiti that now colored my arms, legs, and stomach.

CUTTING LOST ME FOREVER MY PLACE AS THE GOOD KID. I was dethroned. Summarily dismissed. Pushed off from atop my pedestal. Good Kid became Damaged Goods. Anorexia was a blip. A painful, troublesome blip, but a blip nonetheless. No permanent damage. No real harm done. Cutting, though, that was different.

My mother set about trying to erase my scars. We went to the dermatologist. Multiple times. There were, it turned out, no easy fixes. We investigated plastic surgery and lasers, debated the effectiveness of various topical gels. My mother set about trying to erase my scars because even more for her than for me, they hurt. She saw the scars as her failure, her failure to notice. She could barely look at me. We were bound by love and guilt and hurt for what we'd done and what we hadn't. For the things we said and the things we couldn't.

And then there was this: she didn't want me to go to college. At Vassar, she wouldn't be able to keep her eye on me. She couldn't ensure I'd be safe, she said. She worried that, good student that I was, I'd strive for better marks in self-destruction. That one day, with hard work, I'd get an A. An A for mission Accomplished. For potential Actualized. She said, "I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you." It seemed best not to mention that most of my injuries had occurred under her roof. That something had already happened to me.

THAT SPRING, MRS. BOWERSOX, the mother of a retarded child I mentored as a volunteer, caught me unawares, my sweater off, as I was parking my car. I didn't know anyone was around. I thought I was safe. She never liked me after that. "It's not," she told me sternly, "a good thing." The word "cutting" was not said, but we both knew what she meant. She let me play with her daughter that afternoon, but she didn't like it. Didn't like me. Mostly, she didn't like IT—that elephant in the room. Afterwards, she almost always found a reason to cancel.

Freshman year at college there was the blood-bank employee who wouldn't draw my blood. Too much scar tissue around the

veins or something. "People do the craziest things," she noted. I nodded.

The summer I was twenty, a portly cashier at the Au Bon Pain on the corner of 15th Street and Fifth Avenue, in Manhattan, told me I was crazy. "They ought to send you to Bellevue," he said good-naturedly. I smiled, embarrassed. What did one say to that? How did one begin to defend oneself against the not-so-baseless charge? He gave my friend and me free cookies.

There were cab drivers, passersby, countless numbers of salespeople. They all said the same thing: What happened to your arms? Nasty cat, I would remark. Or, accident with a weed-wacker. Track marks from my years of living on the edge. Most often I said nothing. Just shrugged, adding, "I'm fine." And then, "Don't worry about me."

I'll admit it: Mrs. Bowersox made me weep. She was the first. But soon enough I toughened up. My mom, though. What I did to her will never stop hurting.

JAY WAS THE FIRST BOY TO SEE ME NAKED. I took his hand and said, *Here, let me give you the tour.* I ran his hand over my stomach. *This is where I started,* I said. *You see, I thought I was fat and it seemed only natural to attack what ailed me.* I guided his fingers

I WAS UGLY AND FAT AND STUPID AND WORTHLESS. ALL DAY LONG THESE WORDS RATTLED AROUND MY BRAIN.

over the raised scars that inched up to my belly button. Then I put them on my arms. *And this is where I went when I ran out of space and I still couldn't fix myself.* Sometimes, I told him earnestly, *it's just too hard to be.*

Jay counted my scars. "103," he said. "When I see you again, I don't want there to be any more. You need to find a way 'to be' that doesn't include razors or Band-Aids or blood."

But I didn't see him again. He saw me naked and he stopped calling. He stopped calling and I pretended not to care.

MY CO-WORKERS NEVER KNEW ABOUT ME. About my scars, I mean.

In the summer, I'd stop a few blocks from the office and cover myself up with a sweater. I'd spend all day in the non-air-conditioned loft, sweating.

Brian thought I was religious. That my long sleeves were evidence not of madness, but of piety. Never mind my short skirts.

I told him the truth because he asked and because I thought he could handle it.

"Can I see?"

I hesitated.

"Sure," I said, rolling up my sleeve.

"Jesus!" he said. "Jesus Christ!"

"It's okay," I told him. "Really it is." And then, after a minute, "After you've known me for a while, you won't even see them."

That was a lie, of course. Because my friends never stopped "seeing" them. But because it's a subject of which we never speak, I can pretend they do.

It's always strangers, I've found, who ask the questions. The people you love—the people you are dying to give answers

to—they ignore the scars altogether. Out of politeness, maybe. Or because they just don't really want to know.

"I WAS A TEENAGE CUTTER," THE HEADLINES WOULD SAY. But that's only part of the story. Rather, I was a teenage mess. I was aching and wounded and the razors only made that manifest. And I wasn't the only girl to feel this way. Studies posit that seven million American women suffer from eating disorders, that one in every two hundred adolescent girls self-harms. And these, of course, are only reported cases. We can only guess at the number of women and girls suffering in silence. If these figures pertained to men and boys, would the world be more attentive? I feel sure that it would.

Feminist theorist Susan Bordo writes about women's struggles: "Loss of mobility, loss of voice, inability to leave the home, feeding others while starving oneself, taking up space, whittling down the space one's body takes up—all have symbolic meaning, all have *political* meaning under the varying rules governing the historical construction of gender." And more than that, cutting and burning and hungering and puking—these are obsessions that distract us from our power, that sideline us from protest-

ing our oppression, from chipping away at patriarchy. They are politically useless. Self-injury is a trap. It keeps the construction of femininity intact and women silent. It keeps our indictment of society unheard. It changes nothing.

But for me, nevertheless, it felt like self-injury worked. But only for a minute. It calmed my brain-hammering thoughts, muffled my excruciating feelings. They always came back, though.

And when they did, all I had was a bloody arm.

IN THE END, AGE TWENTY FOUR, I'VE KEPT MY SCARS. Despite Mom's pleadings. This makes life complicated.

None of my extended family knows about this. My grandparents—Bubbie and Zaidy and Gramma and Poppy—should never, must never, know. They don't need more *tzoris*, and besides, the past is the past, right?

Which is to say that my grandparents haven't seen me in short sleeves in years.

Which is to say that I have an extensive collection of cardigans.

Which is to say that nothing is perfect.

I'm more than the sum of my scars. Of course I am. Self-injury doesn't define me. But my scars are part of me. They're ugly, but they're honest, too.

Kathryn Harrison wrote, "Scars are stories, history written on the body."

And here I am now, waiting to be read. ■

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Dear Editor

a short story by MARCIA SLATKIN

N

ONE SEES HIM COME IN.

Shabbat candles flicker on the table. The braid of challah is almost eaten. Remnants of fruit salad lie in plates, and glasses are empty. Conversation also flickers, sporadic, yet comfortable. It is late.

Newly divorced, I am wondering whether I can remake myself as an observant Jew.

Most of these people are strangers to me. Mark, whom I'd briefly dated after my divorce, is visiting after a year in Israel. If I hosted a Shabbat meal for him, he would invite friends who'd each bring a dish, and we would celebrate.

So, I wear a kerchief around my head as I had seen my grandmother do, and light candles. But I need help with the prayer. The heavy brooding eye of the man seated opposite catches my attention. *Asher Kidushanu*, he prompts, and I go on, haltingly, *L'hadlik neyr shel Shabbat*. Smiling my gratitude to him over the lit candles, I feel myself almost become "the woman of the house." Rolling his head back, stroking his ample beard with clean, thin fingers, he says Kiddush.

My daughters seem mesmerized by the ritual. I'm glad they're seeing it. I never do it, the center of the tradition, and I remember the small candlelit Brooklyn apartment, my grandfather tall and dignified as he davens from the Siddur. *Borey Pri ha-gafen*. Everyone drinks wine. One of Mark's friends says the *Motzi* over the challah. Everyone eats.

I HAD PHONED NICK THAT MORNING TO confirm our date for Saturday night. He's working at the Farmworker's Association, and I haven't seen him for 10 days. That's long—longer than we've ever missed since I met him at that art class he taught last fall. We'd cuddled near cozy wood fires all winter, had taken long walks in spring. Late in June, he'd helped me dig up compost and plant the tomato seedlings I'd grown indoors.

It had been magical: the sun warm, the earth rich, the infant plants sturdy as a chorus line kicking in the breeze. Then suddenly, eight weeks ago, he'd brought a stack of his paintings to store in my basement. Giving up job, apartment, and the artwork I so loved, he'd decided to commit to labor organizing. Migrant workers.

80 hours a week, sleeping in the back room of headquarters' cadre. Our time together narrowed to a trickle.

"I've thought about it," he'd explained. "You think I can draw elegant ads to make businessmen rich while migrants starve 10 miles away?" His blue eyes were clear as he shrugged his shoulders. "I have to do this."

My father had been an organizer back in the 1930s, a worker for peace in Vietnam, so in a way I'm primed for Nick's purity, his commitment. But why the fanaticism? Why 16 hours a day? Why not four hours a day and part-time art jobs? To give up all comfort, to stop painting, to jeopardize our relationship?

Sure enough, he has forgotten Saturday. He has to work. The movement

just started to organize nursery workers in the west end of Suffolk County. He can't get away at all.

"OK, see you, Nick," I said, and I can hear something clipped and harsh in my voice.

"Wait, wait. What about tonight? After 11. Can I come over?"

"I have six people coming for dinner."

"When will they leave?"

"About 11. But it'll be too much. I don't want so much at once."

"Let me come and just be with you. It's been so long. I miss you. Listen, I was made head of the Benefits Committee. That's why things are so screwed up."

I am weary of it. Two months of hunger. Still, his voice is low and calm, and there are spaces between the words that mean that he is capable of listening. I know that about him. He can hear, understand. "OK, Nick," I say. "Come over when you can."

But I pray that they'll be gone before he comes. He might be barefoot, ragged, sick. He might be wearing a wool sweater and pants three sizes too big, or a shirt missing half its buttons, and pants not beginning to cover his ankles. It depends on what came into the office donation box when he decides on a change of clothes. And there's his dog. Brown-spotted white with too small a head and a chunky body, Nick takes him everywhere.

Looking around the table, I wonder what Nick would think of these people. Their projects are confined to Jewish old age homes or the Jewish poor. To Nick, their ideas would probably seem racist, narrow.

But the values chaining us to the flame-centered table have wrought a kind of magic. The Sabbath has been welcomed with joy, its presence palpable.

One guest, a Hillel director, talks about communities that were formed in the '60s. Work, learn, pray, even live together. People listen, waves of talk washing gently over plates of food. As hostess, I get up many times to bring ice cubes, orange juice, mint tea, slices of lemon. And the heavy-lidded eyes and the gruff beard of the pale man who gave me the Hebrew prayer, Moshe, a calligrapher, follow me, making me feel demure and quiet, until the kerchief on my head seems a symbol of religious married life. I feel like part of a ballet. It's as if I am dancing my Orthodox grandmother's role and for the moment don't ask more than to serve. I would pour water over my husband's hands before eating, and hold the towel he would use to dry. All such rituals had been decided centuries ago, and were written in the Law. It was just a matter of deciding to follow it. Was that what I needed now? With two daughters to raise, where should I look? Was it possible that with an observant husband I could be happy?

"Some of those communities survive, and are thriving," says the Hillel director. "Moshe, you belong to one, don't you?"

I turn to look at him. "You belong to one?"

"We don't live together as a group. But we're close."

"Where do you meet?" I ask.

"Remind me before I leave. I'll give you the name," he says. "It's a good way to find people with similar values."

And now Mark is talking about the *Bintel Brief*, the bundle of letters. The early Jewish immigrants to America, often with family still in Eastern Europe, had been transplanted to a civilization with different laws and customs. In the same way that troubled people would write to "Dear Abby," so did the confused immigrants appeal to the editor of the Jewish Daily Forward. Someone had compiled both letters and the editor's answers. "Dear Editor," they all began. "Tell me, help me, what should I do?"

"They published unedited letters," says Mark. "The conflicts are interesting."

"Give me an example."

"They're so varied, you really have to get the book," he says. "For example, 'Dear Editor, in Russia I was engaged to a man whom I loved. He emigrated to America three years ago, and told me he

would send me money for passage. I didn't hear from him, but my family gave me money for the trip. Now I find that he is married, and had a child. What can I do?"

The woman on my right had read them too. "Here's another typical letter," she offers. "Dear Editor, My parents are Orthodox, from Poland. We came to this country eight years ago. I recently met a Jewish man whom I have fallen in love with. But he is a non-religious Communist. My parents have forbidden me to see him. What should I do?"

"My God," I cry, my fist forming involuntarily and banging the table so that the few remaining berries on my fruit plate jump into new patterns. "That sounds like my mother! From an Orthodox home, and my father was a red-haired Communist who had no use for tradition. She's still guilty for having married him. Isn't that incredible?"

"There were many like her," Mark says. The bearded man opposite nods slowly, his cheeks sallow, morose. I lower my eyes. Why had I yelled? Would an observant wife have yelled? The kerchief feels heavy on my head. I raise my arms to fix it, pushing the straying hairs back underneath.

And then the meal ends. My guests seem tired. Mark had a tough week, and was ready for the Shabbat break. They sit a while longer, absently talking about

leaving, about the left-over wine ("You take it. Believe me, I won't use it."), about how delicious my casserole had been, and the fruit salad, half the bowl is left. Good, I think, reaching for a bit more wine. They'll be gone before Nick comes. Thank God. My younger daughter has fallen asleep. I feel dignified and maternal as I kiss my older girl good night.

And suddenly, there is a dog in the living room. People rise from the table, confused.

"How did it get in here?" a woman asks.

"Your cats!" a man says. "What will happen when they see a dog?"

"That's Spot," Lisa says, sleepily. "He was in fights."

"You know the dog?" Mark asks me. "Whose dog is it?"

Spot patters over to the cat's food and with great equanimity begins to tongue up and crunch the brown stars he finds there.

As I put the wine bottle back in the center of the table, the candle flame flickers painfully near my arm. And then, there is Nick, younger than any adult in the room, wearing jeans and a crazy magenta shirt too small for his broad, beautiful body. The open, disarmed faces round the table look at him in disbelief, shuffling chairs to get away from the confined dining area.

The man with the heavy eyelids looks at me in a strange, sinister way, and smiles.

"This is Nick," I stutter, "and this is Mark, and Moshe, and Rich, and Ruth, and, I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name." Nick stands there, uncomfortable, as everyone says a polite hello, and no one knows what else to say or do. They get up and push chairs away and their feet move slowly and erratically toward the front steps like iron filings drawn towards a magnet.

"Moshe, bring the pot that the fruit salad was in," calls Rich, and Moshe comes into the kitchen and look at me, his heavy eyes sardonic: the demure Jewish housewife.

"Take it with you," I beg. "You can enjoy it tomorrow."

"No," he insists. "We made it for you. Your girls will eat it." As he transfers it into a bowl on the sink, he looks at me again through those heavy, mocking lids, and he washes the pot.

"Goodbye," they are calling, "Thank you, it was beautiful, thank you for having

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Thank God.

us." My feet bare beneath the long blue dress that I wear on holidays, I kiss Mark on the cheek and wave to the others as they file through the door.

NICK HAS DISAPPEARED. I clean up hurriedly, gruffly. I pile plates into the sink and pick up glasses four at a time. What right had he? Why did I agree? 11:30? The whole mood is ruined. I feel like punching, like hitting. All week he doesn't call, and then he comes at 11:30. Living a lie.

And where is he now?

Walking through the cool night, I realize that the kerchief has slipped and is hanging down at the back of my neck. I pull it off.

I find him and the dog at the far end of the garden. He is stretched out in the long grass just beyond the ripening tomatoes. As I pass, I inhale their pungent, acrid breath. They should be picked, I think. Some are already split, and ooze the serum of readiness.

And then I am beside him, looking down, waiting.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I stayed in my car for 20 minutes. I was afraid I would fall asleep and not get to see you after all. I figured that maybe if they were friends of yours, you wouldn't mind me meeting them."

"If you walk in after 11, you have to be either my husband or my lover, right?" I say, my voice still harsh from the clatter of the cups and the clank of silver against the porcelain sink.

Suddenly the impossibility of a relationship with a man like Nick in the world I'd grown up in, the world I had known, washes over me as I sit down, clenching the long grass that is mostly weeds because I don't care about such things. But I care about some things, I think. I want someone to pull with me. I don't want to live in the hurricane of revolution. The words knock about in my chest, unsure of whether to come out.

"Why didn't you stay in the house?" I ask.

"I could feel how angry you were," he says quietly. "I thought maybe you were interested in one of those men."

Intuition. Honesty. And I draw closer, looking at him, drinking in the blue sincerity that looks up at me like a stamp



that you paste on letters to the future. He won't change, I think. This is who he is. There is this wonderfully intense and quiet depth for the moments he is with me, this collapsing of space, this momentary feeling of union—and then, nothing. No building. No continuity. No "getting ahead" in any traditional sense. No guarantee of scheduled time in any regular way. And I remember the *Bintel Brief*. To which editor could I write? What expert would understand how still my heart is when near him, and how full?

"I wonder if anyone ever had this kind

of problem before," I say, although he can have no idea what I'm referring to. He wasn't at the dinner and didn't hear.

As if in answer, he carefully presents me with one of our ripe tomatoes. Round, red, it is the perfect size for my outstretched hand. ■

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Three Sisters: Breast Cancer



in Our Family

by SARAH BYCK

Three weeks before my sister Marcy is diagnosed with breast cancer we are sitting at the breakfast table of the house in Montreal where we grew up, eating bagels and sipping coffee. We've left our children with our respective husbands for the weekend to join our parents and youngest sister Ellen for a mini-family reunion. It is a bright April morning and Marcy is telling me about her friend Paula, who is in the throes of a painful and potentially life-saving dilemma. Paula has inherited a gene mutation, known as BRCA-1. This gene mutation puts her at very high risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer. She recently had a prophylactic hysterectomy. Her quandary now is whether she should have her breasts removed as well. Paula is a gynecologist and counsels women daily on difficult health choices, but making a decision like this herself seems a near impossible task.

We sit at the table, my sister and I, eating and reflecting. Marcy lives in Durham, N.C., and I live in Toronto, and the distance makes it difficult to see each other more than a few times a year. Sunlight streams in through the large windows behind us that offer a view of the leafy, hilled backyard we played in as kids. We relish the quiet of a child-free weekend and the luxury of spending a leisurely morning thinking only of ourselves. We speak about Marcy's friend with interest and concern, but also at a comfortable distance.

"Why doesn't Paula just get the mastectomy?" I ask my sister. "What's the big deal?"

We are so untouched. Cancer is something that happens to other people. Our family is safe, we're lucky. My mother and father are 70 and 78 respectively. They still ski every weekend, swim and do yoga through the summer months. We are a fit, active family. We are healthy.

Three weeks later I am back in Toronto in my kitchen making lunch. My husband is in the backyard with our two sons. It is a Thursday, just after the noon hour, and it is one of the first real warm days of the year. The boys have just filled up the inflatable swimming pool, and they are shrieking with glee. These are details that are etched in my mind.

My mother had called the night before needing to speak to me. But by the time I finished reading the boys their bedtime stories, getting them drinks of water and sitting with them until they fell asleep, it was late, and I forgot about the call. I remember it now, plunk myself down on the rust-colored couch and dial my parents' number. My father answers.

"How are you?" I say.

He says, "Here's your mother."

It has always been my mother's job to deal with the more serious family matters. Dread grips my chest. A moment later my mother comes on the line.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Well, it's not good news," she answers.

"What?" I say, my voice rising with fear.

"Marcy has breast cancer."

Even now, writing these words I have the same sensation I had then of that statement simply not being real. Of all of us Marcy especially has a *joie de vivre*, an abundance of energy and drive that is unstoppable and contagious. She has always been invincible, powerfully optimistic. And now, at 42, she has cancer.

"Oh my God!" I say, my face scrunching up in pain. Some protective shield slips down between me and the facts, and I just listen. I can remember the lack of inflection in my mother's

voice, her pause between one sentence and the next, a sudden lurch of blood from my chest to my mouth.

In the span of a few minutes something is blown open in me. I feel myself stepping over into another domain: the domain of “touched by cancer” from which one never fully returns. Even if the diseased cells are cut out, eradicated, zapped with drugs and radiation, there is always the fear of recurrence.

Over the next few days I find myself reliving a hundred times the exchange of those few words between my mother and me.

What's wrong? Well it's not good news. What? Marcy has breast cancer.

As the days go by and I absorb the news, I can't talk about it without bursting into tears. I feel despondent, and unresponsive to the goings-on around me. I drop my kids off at school, then walk through my neighborhood in a kind of daze, looking at people and thinking, *Your life is going on as normal and there's just been a huge rip up the middle of mine.*

The worst part is not being able to talk to Marcy directly. I leave her a couple of messages but she simply isn't answering her phone. She is too overwhelmed to talk to anyone except her husband and our mother, who passes information on to me.

I am hungry for news. After the initial shock, all I want to know is how? where? why? when? What steps will Marcy need to take and how quickly? My mother speculates that there could have been a mix-up with the cell samples, a misinterpretation of the tissue analysis. After all, hadn't Marcy breast-fed both her children for over a year, didn't she exercise regularly and eat well? I can feel the terror in my mother's voice, her bold attempt to mitigate truth's stinging blow. She tells me she hasn't been sleeping well. I too have been tossing and turning, my body filled with a kind of persecutory dread. Then I think of Marcy. She is the one whose breast has been invaded by cancerous cells. This is happening to her. I can't even imagine the kind of nights she is having.

Marcy's initial diagnosis is considered by her doctors to be the sporadic type of breast cancer that strikes roughly 12% of the general female population. None of her doctors think to test her for a **BRCA** gene mutation (**BRCA-1** and **BRCA-2** gene mutations each have slightly different risk factors). While these mutations are high among the Ashkenazi Jewish population, there are not many Jews in Durham, so it does not appear on her doctors' radar. But Marcy has just spent a weekend with her friend Paula and so **BRCA** is very much on her mind. She tells her doctors she wants her **DNA** tested—insists it be done, and fast. Her surgery is imminent, and while the cancer is only in her left breast, she knows that if she does carry the gene mutation she will opt to have both breasts as well as her ovaries removed.

Marcy's doctors predict she has a 15% chance of being a **BRCA** mutation carrier. There is no history of breast or ovarian cancer in our family. There is, in fact, hardly any cancer at all, and so we feel confident that her **DNA** will be normal. Three weeks after Marcy's initial diagnosis I get a call from my sister Ellen. All she says is, “Marcy tested positive for the **BRCA-1** gene mutation.” She doesn't need to say more; we both know

“Why doesn't Paula just get the mastectomy? What's the big deal?”

what that means. Ellen and I are 39 and 41, and both mothers of young boys. We each have a 50% chance of being a carrier.

In the following weeks, Ellen and I set up appointments in our respective cities to have our own **DNA** tested. My parents also arrange to have testing done, though having survived into their seventies, they are not very worried about themselves. We each meet with a genetic counselor, get our blood drawn. Ellen and my parents will have the results of their **DNA** testing in a month's time, mine will take as long as three months.

What we learn during our consultations with the genetic counselors is that the **BRCA-1** mutation is at least a millenium old. One thousand or more years ago a man and a woman had sex, a sperm met an egg, and a child was conceived. When this child was at the single-cell stage—the few moments when it was made of one mere cell—something happened to one of its genes. No one knows why—it is doubtful we ever will—but the **A, G** sequences in one of the **BRCA-1** genes were deleted. The cell divided, copying the mutation onto every cell, the fetus grew and a baby was born. In each of its cells he or she had one good **BRCA-1** gene and one broken one. This person grew up and had children, some or all of whom were carriers, and the mutation was, so to speak, off and running.

The **BRCA-1** gene was discovered a mere 15 years ago by a group of researchers working collaboratively across the globe. We are all born with two **BRCA-1** genes, but women who have a mutation in one of their **BRCA-1** genes have a 50-to-85% lifetime risk of developing breast cancer and a 46% lifetime risk of developing ovarian cancer. The gene is passed down from parent to child; it is not clear whether this mutation occurred spontaneously in many communities or whether it happened once and spread. As well as being prominent in the Ashkenazi Jewish community, the mutation has been found in high numbers in Poland, Iceland, and certain parts of Scotland. Within these tight-knit communities there was not much tolerance for intermarriage and so gene mutations of many kinds flourished.

To date, no genetic intervention is possible. Women who carry this mutation basically have two options: they can undergo yearly breast MRIs and quarterly ovarian screenings or, more radically, elect to have prophylactic surgery in the form of a bilateral mastectomy and oophorectomy (removal of the ovaries) before the disease has a chance to start. Of the women who carry the **BRCA-1** gene mutation, 30% of them opt for a bilateral mastectomy and 60% for the oophorectomy. The others choose to submit to a life of vigilant monitoring. Once a **BRCA-1** mutation has been identified, there are devastating repercussions as offspring, siblings and cousins must be informed, tested, and, if found to be carriers, confronted with the same difficult decision.

Based on the information we gather, Marcy makes the painful decision to have a double mastectomy and both a hysterectomy and an oophorectomy. Later, from an altogether different source, we learn that Marcy's breast cancer is typical of a **BRCA-1** car-

rier, manifesting pre-menopausally as small, multi-focal tumors. Disturbingly, none of her doctors was aware of this, and if she hadn't insisted on the test she may have unwittingly placed herself in further danger, as recurrence of cancer in the remaining breast in **BRCA-1** carriers is high.

Marcy's surgeries go smoothly, and we wait anxiously for the pathology report to determine if her cancer has spread into her lymph nodes. The frozen section (a quick look under a microscope) taken during the surgery showed no signs of cancer, so we feel hopeful and confident. The worst is over. She's come through the operation, her healing is underway and she is feeling optimistic.

On Wednesday evening, the day Marcy's pathology report is due back, my mother calls. The minute I hear her voice I can tell the news isn't good. She sounds like she's just woken up with a migraine, or that she's been mildly drugged. I feel my chest fill with pain. She tells me that during the more in-depth analysis they found a small spot of cancer on one of the three lymph nodes they had taken out. This is not the news we were hoping for. Marcy will have to go back for more surgery in a month's time to have all the lymph nodes on her left side removed. She will also have to undergo chemotherapy, and after that she will be required to stay on an estrogen-inhibiting drug for five years. It also posits the terrifying question that we can't really answer: has the cancer spread to other parts of her body?

As we wait for further news, my husband and I decide to

litmus test, since frogs are particularly sensitive to environmental stresses. What they've been finding has not been good.

Later when the children are asleep and my husband is reading on the porch, I walk up the dirt road to watch the sun set. The air is warm and moist. A couple of mosquitos buzz around my head. I feel such an enormous sadness all through my body. It is hard to believe that it has only been a month since Marcy's diagnosis. In that time she has had a bilateral mastectomy, has learned she is node-positive and will need months of chemotherapy, and Ellen and I have given **DNA** samples to determine our carrier status. It all serves to remind me how life can change in an instant. Despite the beauty of the view, things suddenly feel unbearable. I am having moments every few days where I think, *How can this be happening? How will I bear it?* I watch a bird soar through the darkening sky, a cow lows nearby. I suddenly realize how tired I am. I turn and walk back down the road to the farmhouse.

The weeks go by slowly and then, less than two months after Marcy discovered she had breast cancer, the clinic in Montreal calls to tell Ellen and my parents that they have the results of their **DNA** testing. They must receive the news in person, so they make an appointment for the following morning at 9:00 and promise to call me as soon as they know. The next morning at 9:30 I roll out my yoga mat. I will do a round of sun salutations and some forward bends, then some calming breathing exercises. I am aware of the time passing and worry that if the phone isn't ringing the news mustn't be good.

A thousand or more years ago a man and a woman had sex, and a child was conceived. When this child was at the single-cell stage—the few moments when it was made of one mere cell—something happened to one of its genes. And the mutation was off and running.

take our boys away for the weekend. We drive out of the city to stay at a friend's red-roofed stone farmhouse off a dirt road. After a week of crushing heat and city-wide smog alerts, the clean country air is a welcome change. We take a walk through fields of tall grass and come upon a small, bullrush-encircled pond where groups of frogs doze on the shore. We can hear the deep-throated croaks and the quick splashes as they dive into the water at our approach. The boys decide they want to catch a frog.

Under the warm sun the frogs are slow and sleepy so the boys have no trouble dipping their nets into the water and pulling up frog after frog, releasing each one back into the pond after a few minutes of scrutiny. One of the frogs the children catch is missing an eye. In its place is a sphere of sorts, an outline neatly etched into the side of its face where the eye should be. We study it. I remark to my husband that even out here, in the thick of nature, mutations happen. Is it the effects of the toxic acid rain that the wind carries to even the remotest of locations? Or is this just a random birth defect that befell this unlucky frog? We'll never know, although scientists do perform frog counts these days as a

I start assuming the worst. I decide the only thing to do is to call them, but as I get up to do so the phone rings. After weeks of bad news, we are finally given something positive. Ellen's results show she is not a **BRCA-1** mutation carrier. Neither is my mother. It is my father who has passed the gene down to Marcy, and because he is male he is in virtually no danger. (Only a very small percentage of male **BRCA-1** carriers develop breast cancer, although their risk of prostate and colon cancers is slightly elevated.) Ellen's voice is light, we laugh giddily. For a moment we are happy and hopeful. Their appointment was so lengthy, she explains, because they were drilling the researcher on what he felt was the best treatment for Marcy. Our tone becomes more sober. With Ellen's uncertainty about her own health out of the way, she has more energy to research possible treatments for Marcy. And the possibilities are numerous.

There are a variety of new drug therapies and many clinical trials underway, but most are still in the preliminary stages. It is unsettling to see that the more research we do, the more we understand that there is no single prescribed course of treatment,

but many, with similar degrees of success. The definitive particulars of cancer remain a mystery. Marcy will be offered guidance regarding sequence and duration of care, intensity and kind of medication—but ultimately she is the one who has to make the final decision as to the treatment she wants.

After much deliberation, Marcy chooses the most aggressive kind of chemotherapy—a cocktail of highly potent chemicals administered intravenously every two weeks for four months. She is expected to go into sudden and irreversible menopause, she will lose her hair, she will lose bone mass and muscle density, she will have little immunity against common illnesses. In a word, it will be hell. But she has no choice. She wants to live.

After Marcy's first chemo round I fly down to Durham to be with her. It is the first time I've seen her since her diagnosis. Much has changed about her. She is thinner, paler, despite the bright July sunlight streaming in through the windows. And she has no breasts. It is odd to see her looking flat-chested and skinny, but it has a familiar quality to it as well: this is what she looked like when she was 13. She was late to develop and had to endure the teasing associated with flat-chestedness. She asks if I want to see under her shirt, to see what having no breasts looks like. I am nervous, but I say I do. I want to be completely supportive of what she is going through. She lifts up her shirt and I see two long pink scars running horizontally across the places where her breasts used to be. It is much easier to look at than I'd feared. The skin around her incisions looks pinched and heavily tampered with, but I am amazed at how quickly the body is able to heal. She pulls her shirt back down. I know she is planning to have reconstructive surgery, a process that will take some months, and involve more pain. But she wants to feel normal. She wants to have breasts again.

After waiting almost three months, I finally get the call from Aletta, my genetic counselor, informing me she has the results of my DNA testing. Her tone is neutral when we speak. I know she is not permitted to say anything over the phone so I don't engage her in chit-chat, just quickly set a date to meet. For so long I felt sure I didn't have the gene mutation. But all the waiting has done something to me. I feel nervous, worried, uncertain.

On the day of my appointment Aletta leads me into her office and we sit down. She asks if I'm certain I want to know the results of my test. I know, then, the news can't be good. But of course I say yes, I do want to know.

"Unfortunately," she says sliding a piece of paper toward me, "you are a carrier."

I look down. I see my name typed neatly at the top of the page and below it the words **BRCA-1: positive**.

"Oh," I say. After months of waiting for these results I feel oddly emotionless. It will take the next few days before the magnitude of what this means sinks in. I become absurdly clinical. We talk about the different kinds of mastectomies performed, the assortment of implants available to me, and how menopausal symptoms can effectively be mitigated by hormone replacement therapy. These are the things that will happen to my body. This is what will be cut into and removed, and the sooner the safer. I listen, taking notes, nodding attentively. I must have a breast MRI as

soon as possible, then meet with the ovarian cancer clinic for more information on ovarian scans, blood tests and oophorectomies.

After an hour and a half I stumble back out into the sunlight of the bright August day and climb onto my bike. I pedal along the familiar streets in the direction of home. My body strains and pushes up the hills. It is the same body as it was yesterday—nothing about it has changed. I simply have one additional piece of information about an infinitesimally small part of it. And the repercussions of that are enormous. What if I didn't know? What if I just never found out? Can't I ignore it? But no. Marcy has breast cancer. This is real. To pretend that this means nothing would be foolish.

I stop on a quiet side street, turn on my cell phone and dial home. My husband is taking care of the boys, and for some reason I don't want to see his face when I tell him the bad news. I suspect I don't want to see pain and worry. Or pity. I am not yet ready to absorb the full meaning of what I've just learned.

My husband answers after a couple of rings. I hear the boys' voices in the background, playing, laughing. I am minutes away from home. It seems foolish to be speaking over the phone.

"I have it," I say. "I have the gene."

"Oh, no," he says. "Oh, Sarah." I tell him I have some things to pick up at the health food store and will be home soon.

"Ride carefully," he says. And it is true that I feel a bit unsteady, a little spaced-out. I feel different, suddenly, from everyone else. This is what bad news does. I am aware all at once that there are so many people suffering. Every day someone somewhere is receiving a piece of bad news, living with her own private terror. There is no protection from life. Invincibility is an illusion.

I have one female cousin on my father's side. A second cousin, or a first cousin once removed. Later I call and ask Aletta what the chances are of her being a **BRCA-1** carrier.

I hear her rustling papers. She is looking at my family tree.

"Twelve percent chance," she tells me. "We would test her."

I make a mental note to myself to get in touch with this cousin, although not right away, not before I've had the chance to grasp more of this myself. But how does one inform someone of this?

I have two boys, but Marcy has a girl, who is just turning 14, just coming gently and beautifully into her womanhood. Medical law dictates that she can't be tested until she's an adult. Until then there's no need for her to know about any of the possible genetic implications. Just last week Marcy called to tell me that her daughter asked her innocently, almost nonchalantly, "Is breast cancer hereditary?" Fortunately Marcy was prepared. Knowing her daughter as she does she had a sense this question was looming—imminent, even. She was able to stay calm, to answer honestly but sensitively.

"Some breast cancers can be hereditary," she told her daughter. "But the good news is that there is so much research being done that by the time you grow up we'll know much more about how to stop cancer before it even begins." This could well be true.

For now, though, we are three sisters coming to terms with what has happened to our family: Marcy in Durham, Ellen in Montreal, and me in Toronto. Our story is unfolding still.... ■

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Four (same-sex, half-Jewish) Weddings and a Funeral

A Breast Cancer Narrative

by SUSAN GOLDBERG



My girlfriend proposed—if you could call it a proposal—over the phone, long-distance, on a Sunday afternoon in October 2003. Cordless in hand, I was rooting through my fridge for something to eat when she said, “So, what do you think about getting married?”

I paused, the cold air from the refrigerator blowing in my face. “Um,” I said, “okay.”

And that was that. We were getting hitched.

The Canadian province of Ontario had—finally—granted same-sex partners the right to marry only the previous summer, and all of a sudden “gay marriage” was on the radar, the topic of every conversation, garnering its own special section of the editorial pages each day and forcing Canadian queers to consider the question: Will you or won’t you, now that you can?

“Not us,” I had thought about me and Rachel. After all, we were good feminists. We both had master’s degrees in Women’s

Studies, for God’s sake: we had been well schooled in marriage’s economic, not romantic, origins, in the idea that modern marriage is rooted in archaic notions of women as chattel. Not for us the need for state sanction, that piece of paper from the city hall keeping us tied and true. Not for us the capitulation to tradition.

And then, she asked. And all of a sudden it was us. When I asked her why, Rachel simply said, “It felt like a good approximation of where our relationship was at the time.”

She had a point. Eight and a half years in and counting, there we were. We’d just spent the previous year rescuing the relationship from near ashes, sitting across from a skilled therapist as we

learned to talk to each other all over again, to wipe clear that pane of murky glass that seemed to be there between us, distorting our images of each other. She'd finished her doctorate, had got a tenure-track job teaching at a Northern Ontario university. I'd built up my freelance career. We were looking at houses up north; I planned to move from Toronto to be with her in the fall. And we had booked the first flight for our sperm donor to fly in from Vancouver so we could begin the process of trying to have a baby.

We didn't tell anyone for a few weeks. At first, Rachel didn't want to tell anyone at all, ever. She wanted to elope, have a secret ceremony at city hall and never mention it again. I think she was scared: if we said it out loud, if we told anyone, it would be real. But we were also scared of my family's influence. I come from a family big on big weddings—weddings of the white-dress variety, with dozens of attendants. Weddings that cost tens of thousands—if not hundreds of thousands of dollars. Weddings with DJs and klezmer bands, with first dances, with showers and rehearsals, with open bars and (I swear) mashed-potato bars and (kosher) hot dog carts wheeled in at midnight. Weddings with disposable cameras on the tables and head tables, preceded by a year's worth of Friday-night dinners in honor of the engaged couple. My mother's sister owns a bridal store. We had lots of reasons to be afraid.

Slowly, though, we both warmed to the idea of a public ceremony, on our own terms. We began to plan our ideal wedding: outside, maybe on one of the islands on Lake Ontario. Summer. A string quartet. Fantastic outfits. I would bake. A big party with

My mother's sister owns a bridal store. We had lots of reasons to be afraid.

family and close friends. We'd find a way to afford it.

And then we told my parents. More precisely, on a Sunday evening in November, we invited ourselves over for dinner and told them about our baby plans. "And there's one more thing," I said.

"There's more?" my mother said, weakly. My father just grinned as he sat next to her on their family room couch, where she spent most of her time these days.

"There's more," I confirmed. "We're getting married."

What I thought was an afterthought became the main event. "You're getting married? When?" asked my mother. "Where? How?"

We began to outline our vision: summer, outside, family and close friends—

"Well," she interrupted, "you'll have to do it here. At our house."

Rachel and I looked at each other. I was about to explain why we couldn't possibly hold the wedding at my parents' house when Rachel said, "Okay. That would be lovely." I looked at her as though she had gone insane. "What were you thinking?" I asked her in the car on the way home. "Well," she said, "it's just that it's your mom."

My mom. Who had reached out in dozens of small ways to my girlfriend over the years. Who had helped pave the way toward my father's slow but eventually steadfast acceptance of

my relationship. Whose chicken soup Rachel—at the time a vegetarian—ate without hesitation. My mother, battling breast cancer, there, on the couch.

And that was the end of the first wedding, and the beginning of the second. By Monday morning, my mother had notified all our relatives: I came home that evening to a half-dozen messages of *mazal tov* from scattered cousins, aunts and uncles, who promised to be there for our "big day." By Tuesday morning, my mother was in full swing, brainstorming caterers and flower arrangements, guest lists and officiants.

"Um," I said, "I'm not sure we can afford all this."

She paused. "Oh, Susan," she said, "we'd like to pay for it."

It was a vast gesture of acceptance that I should have anticipated and hadn't—and the fact that I hadn't suggests that I was more caught up in doubts about the legitimacy of my own marriage than were my parents. For them, this wasn't a "gay wedding." It was their daughter's wedding, and, damn it, they were going to do it up right.

Doing it up right, I soon found out, meant a lot of details. We set the date: June 13. We met with the caterer. We negotiated the guest list, capping my parents' friends to, in my mother's opinion, an impossibly small number that seemed to grow as the weeks passed. (We had conversations like this: Her: "Gloria's coming." Me: "But she's not invited." Her: "I know. I told her that. And she's still coming.") We found a rabbi—possibly the only one in the city—who would agree to perform both an interfaith and same-sex wedding. A secular humanist Jew, her only conditions were that the ceremony contain no reference to God and no sexism. We could live with that. We booked the string quartet, asked my sister-in-law to do the flowers. I applied for our marriage licence: the forms hadn't yet been updated to reflect the new legislation, and so my name was entered under the heading "groom." I wondered which of the two men in line ahead of me at the registrar's office would be a bride. After much convincing on the part of family and friends, we even registered, and then spent a couple of giddy hours debating china patterns and testing the fine blades of luxurious German knives.

In the meantime, we bought a house up north. We flew our donor in for a second try, then me to Vancouver for the third, which "took"—I was pregnant. My parents were over the moon. So was the rabbi.

And my mother's chemo failed.

Through it all, we had tried to ignore the question that hovered, unspoken, in the backs of our minds: Would she make it to June 13? Back in October, we had been optimistic. Yes, my mom was weak, but for the past three years each successive round of chemotherapy, each new drug, had brought her back. Over the past 20 years she had survived, against astonishing odds, two previous bouts with cancer, one ovarian, one breast. The disease was the product of mutation 5382insC of a gene now known as BRCA-1 (BR for *breast*, CA for *cancer*). Women with this mutation—women like my mother, and her mother, who died of ovarian cancer in her 40s, and her mother, who died of

I had resisted testing. Never mind that I was pregnant—and potentially with a daughter to whom a Jewish family legacy of cancer could be bequeathed.

breast cancer—have a pretty high risk of developing ovarian or breast cancer. One in 45 Ashkenazi Jewish people carry a BRCA mutation, as opposed to one in 800 to 1000 individuals in the general population. Their daughters—women like me—have a 50% chance of inheriting that mutation.

Those were the facts. And yet we couldn't quite face them. Although my mother had tested positive for the genetic mutation, I had resisted testing. Never mind that I was pregnant—and potentially with a daughter to whom a Jewish family legacy of cancer could be bequeathed. Never mind that my mother's cells were coded to multiply beyond her body's capability to sustain them. I couldn't think about my own mortality, and as for my mother, we thought she was invincible. We were counting on her track record of almost miraculous resilience: Why would this occurrence—breast cancer now metastasized—be any different?

And yet, it was. By April, she was vomiting up most of what she ate, and had started spending nights as well as days on the couch, because the walk up the stairs was too hard. She found it increasingly difficult to breathe.

We all saw the third wedding coming, but we hesitated. Finally, my mother said out loud the words no one else had been able to say. She'd spent the night at the hospital in respiratory distress; the doctors had drained two liters of fluid from around her right lung, the one that didn't have a catheter in it already. We had an appointment with the palliative care doctor the next morning.

"Susan," she said, "I don't think I'm going to make it to June 13."

"We'll change the date," I said. "We'll do it sooner." She nodded. My father just looked into his lap as he sat next to her on the couch. I didn't cry until I phoned the rabbi to reschedule.

We settled on Mother's Day, May 9, three weeks away. It was the closest we could fathom pulling everything together. It would be a truncated affair, just family and a few close friends at my parents' house, no dates, no quartet. Our families changed their flights. We flew up north, signed the lawyers' papers on the house, flew home, found rings and outfits, met with our midwife. We printed off our *ketubah* (no God, no sexism)—no time to commission anything custom. I had a pre-wedding pedicure, and then burst into tears when the polish smudged. "All I want is for my toenails to look nice," I wailed in the car on the way home. Rachel looked at me sideways. "Is it really your toes you're upset about?"

Meanwhile, my mother deteriorated rapidly. She had moved from the couch to a hospital bed we'd set up in the family room, but she could no longer get comfortable. Even small efforts like going to the washroom became overwhelming. My father spent hours trying to convince her to eat something, anything, but she wasn't hungry, and her body wasted, wisps of chemo-thin hair framing her gaunt face. She had coughing fits that left her exhausted. Some

combination of drugs and disease left her unfocused and anxious, confused or annoyed. "I know I'm not making sense," she told me. "It's okay," I said. "You don't have to make sense."

The night before the ceremony, we ordered in Thai for the immediate family members who had congregated. My mom napped in the family room while we ate quietly in the kitchen, unsure how to work her decline into the celebration, how to acknowledge such sorrow in the midst of what was supposed to be joy. The food tasted like sawdust.

"I'm not sure I can go through with this," I told Rachel at the door as she left to meet her mother at our downtown apartment. I was going to sleep at my parents' home, on night duty.

The next morning, the tips of my mother's fingers had turned dusky and I wasn't able to rouse her. But her chest rose and fell, and so I called up denial, found the now-much-too-big clothes she wanted to wear and laid them out, to help her into later on. She died while I left the room to eat breakfast and while my father was at his computer, printing out his toast to the brides. "Excuse me?" said the home-care worker. "Miss? I think that your mother is not breathing." I closed her eyes, rested my forehead against hers for a moment. We held the funeral the following day. My cousins, already assembled for the wedding, were pallbearers. The wedding caterer fed the hundreds of people who showed up at the house following the burial. Rachel and I exchanged rings privately, then sat shiva.

The fourth wedding was on June 13 in my parents' backyard—a much smaller affair than we'd originally planned; just family and a few close friends, hors d'oeuvres and lunch. In the photos of the ceremony, we all look so sad under the *chuppah*: my father and brother are holding back tears; my sister-in-law wears dark glasses, and Rachel and I clutch each other's hands and stare straight into each other's eyes, biting our lips. At three months pregnant (with, as it turned out, a boy, who would be named for his Bubbe), I am barely showing. When the time came to break the glass, though—because according to Jewish tradition, in each *simcha* we are always reminded of our sorrows—we couldn't do it. We tried, but maybe there had been too much sorrow already. Our high heels simply pushed the glass deeper into the soft ground, where it stayed resolutely whole, unbroken, unbreakable. ■

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Breast cancer is a particularly Jewish and female experience. A Lilith web exclusive: "Breast Cancer Refusenik" by Judith Beth Cohen and a chance to talk online about your own experiences and thoughts. www.lilith.org/blog/?p=491

REVIEWS

Secular Religious Novels

The gaze of outsiders upon modern observant Jewish life

Romantic upheaval and family drama attain richer focus when seen through the eyes of newfound religious piety. *Gone to the Dogs* by **Mary Guterson** (St. Martin's Press, \$13.99) and *You or Someone Like You* by **Chandler Burr** (Ecco/HarperCollins, \$25.99) depict heroines struggling to make sense of their love and family lives, while newly observant relatives look on.

In *Gone to the Dogs*, Rena is a young career waitress living in an unbelievably messy apartment and recuperating from an abrupt breakup with her mountain-climbing boyfriend. The book's central conceit: she kidnaps her ex's dog, or, as she introduces the scenario, "I invited [him] over and he very kindly accepted my invitation." Thus begins a screwball narrative where Rena surreptitiously stalks her ex and embarks on awkward blind dates, punctuated by hilarious family dinners with her divorced parents and her Orthodox sister Aviva. We first meet Aviva bewigged in her Orthodox home, when she tries to orchestrate a setup between her secular sister and Chaim—who had "what appeared to be a full head of dark curly hair—you never know what might be lurking beneath the skullcap." When Chaim reveals that he tends to go by "Chuck" and that the *kippah* was an act for the dinner party, he and Rena begin a tentative courtship, bonding over the artifice of religion that brought them together. Aviva, in the meantime, is going through her own drama—should she (gasp) stop wearing her wig?—and this crisis of faith brings the two sisters closer.

Gone to the Dogs is a quick and easy read, perfect for beaches or a lazy afternoon. Chandler Burr's *You or Someone Like You*, in contrast, is a thickly layered literary novel of a complicated family in Hollywood, told through the articulate and pain-racked voice of the literature Ph.D. Anne Rosenbaum. Anne is middle-aged, British, blonde and underemployed, intermarried to the colossally successful film producer Howard. The charismatic Howard has left his Jewish upbringing behind in Brooklyn, preferring the life of secular words and beautiful people, whom he captivates at dinner parties with rhymed retellings of Shakespeare. Anne, meanwhile, spends her time coordinating a "great books" group for the Hollywood elite and keeping an eye on their teenage son, Sam.

The novel's tension comes to a head when Sam stumbles back home after a disastrous trip to Israel, having been expelled from yeshiva after his "wrong-half" Jewish status is revealed. Howard sees his son's trauma as a call back to his own childhood faith, and he leaves his marriage to pursue the Orthodox path. What follows is Anne's descent into desperate anger, defending her son (who has his own secrets) and railing against the Jewish establishment. It's rare to see this character in a modern novel: the non-Jew resenting the exclusivity of Jewish privilege and tribalism, uncomfortable with the knowledge that her husband loves their child because he looks like her. It's a tribute to Burr's deft skills that Anne remains so sympathetic a character, even when spouting remarks so critical of Jews and Judaism. What makes the novel even more unique is its narrative voice: Howard and Anne quote Donne, Eliot, Joyce back and forth, using literature to illuminate their inner

worlds. Read as a pair, these novels paint a picture of modern observant Judaism from the outsider's gaze: how it keeps some out, even as it holds others close.

SARA N. S. MEIROWITZ

Fashion and Feathers

Jewish "garmentos" in Germany, Austria and South Africa

For hundreds of years, Jews in all parts of the world have made their living through the clothing trades, from toiling in little *shmata* businesses to owning huge department stores such as Macy's and Abraham & Strauss. Two recent books explore this history, each from a very different angle.

Broken Threads: The Destruction of the Jewish Fashion Industry in Germany and Austria edited by **Roberta S. Kremer**



(Palgrave, \$36.95) documents how German Jews found their way to the garment business—via the Emancipation of the Jews in Germany during the 19th century—and how this connection came to a brutal end. The book, an outgrowth of a 1999 museum exhibit in Vancouver, is beautifully designed and illustrated. Each of its six essays focuses on a single aspect of this tragic story, from the architecture of the retail stores to the Nazi cruelties. By 1939, historian Irene Guenther tells us here, the German fashion industry had been made *Judenrein*, free of Jews, “through a combination of massive pressure, hateful propaganda, direct intervention, blacklists, sanctions, boycotts, and firings, as well as illegal takeovers, buy-outs, and liquidations.” Gloria Sultano, a Viennese historian, describes much the same thing happening in Vienna, but much more quickly: within a year after the *Anschluss* in 1938, all the Jewish-owned textile and clothing businesses had been “Aryanized.”

The irony, as Sultano and Guenther note, is that the Nazis, by “cleansing” the fashion industry of Jews, destroyed it altogether. “Along with the Jews, elegance disappeared from Berlin,” announced Magda Goebbels, the wife of Hitler’s propaganda minister after the deportations to ghettos and concentration camps began. She knew what she was talking about: during the 1930s, she and Emmy Göring had refused to stop patronizing their favorite Jewish designers, despite the racial laws. Apparently even for the wives of Hitler’s closest henchmen, fashion could trump Nazi ideology.

While Jews in Germany were establishing clothing businesses, Lithuanian Jews who had immigrated to South Africa at the start of the 20th century were carving out a lucrative niche for themselves in the harvesting and trading of ostrich feathers. Who knew? In *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (Yale University Press, \$30), UCLA history professor **Sarah Abrevaya Stein** describes how Jews dominated the worldwide trade of that then-hot commodity. Yiddish-speaking feather buyers traveled around the Cape, purchasing feathers from Boer ostrich farmers to

auction off to the wholesalers, who in turn shipped them to Jewish middlemen in London, the hub of the global feather market. There the plumes were once again sold at auction, this time to be sent to Paris and New York, where they were resold, processed, made into boas and sewn onto hats by Jewish and Italian immigrant women working in sweatshops devoted solely to ostrich plumes.

Though Stein sometimes buries the narrative in academic jargon, the story itself is fascinating. The most interesting sections of her book concern the little town of Oudtshoorn, near Capetown, whose economy was based on ostrich feathers. Until the beginning of World War I, the global feather market boomed, and many Jewish Oudtshoorn feather merchants grew rich. But in 1914, a change in fashion, and the beginning of the war in Europe, caused the market to crash. Stein quotes from *Oudtshoorn, Yerushalayim d’Afrike*, a book published in Johannesburg in 1940. It was written in Yiddish by one Leybl Feldman, who describes the aftermath of the crash: “The ostrich feather dealers, speculators, and exporters were reduced to poverty, feeling as hard done by as the ostriches had formerly felt after being plucked. ... Jews no longer went out to buy feathers. Instead they wandered the streets of Oudtshoorn in dire straits like victims of fire, dejected and desperate.”

ALICE SPARBERG ALEXIOU

Rescue Missions in WWII

American Jewish women fought fiercely on the bureaucratic front

How did American Jews help their persecuted coreligionists in Europe during

Bat-Ami Zucker (Valentine Mitchell, \$79.95), challenges the conventional scholarly opinion that they did nothing, or too little. Zucker describes in detail the substantial efforts to rescue European Jews undertaken by several American Jewish organizations, particularly the National Committee for Aid to Refugees and Emigrants coming from Germany (NCC) and its successor, the National Refugee Service (NRS)

Zucker draws us to the work of Razovsky, the remarkable activist who served as the executive director of the NCC and head of the Migration Department of the NRS. Zucker also credits the networks of American Jewish women upon whom Razovsky relied. These women helped German-Jewish children emigrate and find homes in the United States; signed affidavits to help European Jews come into the U.S. under the restrictive immigration laws of the 1930s; connected European Jewish scholars with American universities that would provide them with work, and thereby visas; and helped refugee Jews who were interned as “enemy aliens” once they had entered the United States. The efforts of these women—particularly in the face of bureaucratic and political obstacles—were extraordinary, yet they have typically been ignored by historians. Zucker’s book rightfully brings these women to our attention, offering overwhelming scholarly evidence of their hard work and dedication.

Dense with archival detail, the book may not attract a lay audience. Zucker organizes the story around the accomplishments of the NCC and NRS, making the chronology of events a bit confusing. Perhaps most disappointing is that the book focuses on these organizational

The women who rescued children, saved scholars and resettled refugees were ignored by historians—until now.

the Holocaust? *Cecilia Razovsky and the American-Jewish Women’s Rescue Operations in the Second World War* by

activities rather than on the individuals working within them. There is only a brief biography of Razovsky in the

beginning to anchor our understanding of her; the book could have been so much richer with more effort to center the narrative on that biography. And there is even less detail about the ordinary women upon whom Razovsky relied: they generally remain nameless and faceless.

Nonetheless, by spotlighting the prodigious activities of women—particularly Cecilia Razovsky—in rescuing Jews from Europe, Bat-Ami Zucker reorients our thinking about American Jews and the Holocaust, and encourages us to explore further the impact of women throughout American Jewish history.

KIRSTEN FERMAGLICH

The Veil Unveiled

Why we cover—and reveal.

Humans have been concealing parts of their bodies ever since they realized they were naked. What is concealed and what revealed varies, however, and in *The Veil* (University of California, \$21.95), **Jennifer Heath** collects feminist writing about coverings across cultures.

The veil has become a symbol of Islam in our century, and is both reviled and celebrated as such. Heath uses this symbol as a tantalizing opening, but broadens the scope of her inquiry, from the Indian sari and Hasidic wig to the hiding of servants in their quarters in South America. She includes such a range of activities under the

declare this my sanctuary...from which I impart what will." In a modern transposition, young working women in Cairo are adopting a veil and are "able to have the cake of modernity and eat the prestige of tradition too." Some of their mothers are horrified, reminding their daughters that they fought for the right to unveil, which the daughters are now spurning.

Roxanne Kamayani Gupta contrasts the Muslim burqa with the Indian sari. She claims: "The sari attracts because it is a veil that covers but does not hide." Moreover, in some Eastern traditions, all matter is a veil that covers the essence, the soul. It is women and goddesses who wear the sari, and it is the sari that transforms male into female and female into the divine. "All that cloth between body and world creates a boundary, a consciousness of the relationship between the inner subjective reality, our place of concealment, and the outer world of objective experience..."

Catholic nuns dressed in habits for centuries before Vatican II in the 1960s allowed them to think of dressing otherwise. Some "women religious" were overwhelmed by this change, fearing "loss of respect...loss of vocation, trouble with hair, vanity, expense, unsightliness of figure..." For these women, the habit was a uniform that gave them an identity and a status, and removed the need to be concerned with beauty and image.

Most of the essays in this collection interweave personal discussions with aca-

dem of Jewish religious observance, and then deciding to turn back. Although I could understand the themes of the hidden and revealed in these stories, their narratives were remote from the more central discussions in the volume about oppression and choice; veilings and equally forced unveilings; and the sexism and the feminism of the way we cover and uncover ourselves.

C. DEVORA (VIVA) HAMMER

An Angle on Mikvah

Trying to inspire secular readers

Traditional Judaism regards a menstruating woman as ritually impure and therefore sexually impermissible to her husband. By immersing in the purifying waters of the *mikveh* (ritual bath) seven days after her menstrual flow ceases, she returns to a state of ritual purity.

Classic rabbinic thought views menstruation, *niddah*, as representing the fallen state of human beings from the time of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden; *niddah* also connotes women's flawed reproductive state, as each menstruation is viewed as the death of a potential life. Against these traditional disparaging rabbinic views of women's monthly cycles, **Varda Polak-Sahm**, in *The House of Secrets: The Hidden World of the Mikveh*, (Beacon Press, \$28.95) seeks to understand why and how some contemporary Israeli women choose to follow these ancient laws, which are known rather archaically as *taharat ha-mishpacha*, "family purity."

From awe to antipathy, the ritual monthly immersion in the mikveh elicits widely divergent reactions in 21st-century women. Polak-Sahm, a secular Israeli with Sephardic, ultra-Orthodox, Me'ah Shearim roots, posits the framing questions of her book: Why do some Jewish women choose to immerse themselves in the mikveh? Do they do it for spiritual reasons, or possibly as a fertility strategy? Do they act out of superstition, to ward off possible birth defects, or as a ploy to maintain sexual excitement in a marriage? Or is it because a woman is commanded to do so as part of the laws of family purity?

Young working women in Cairo are "able to have the cake of modernity and eat the prestige of tradition too."

veiling rubric that she threatens to blur her focus, which is on why and how we cover and reveal strategic parts of our bodies.

In the Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 2000 BCE), the woman who teaches the hero wisdom is veiled, and contributor Mohja Kahf believes that "to be veiled is to partake in a primal power: I see without being fully seen...like a queen...I

demetic research. It is a promising approach, but it requires a high level of skill which isn't always attained. I found the Jewish voices some of the oddest, particularly Michelle Auerbach ("Drawing the Line at Modesty: My Place in the Order of Things") and Eve Grubin ("After Eden: The Veil as a Conduit to the Internal") who write of journeying to the brink

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“A world that did not include her enslavement.” Noteworthy Poetry

Rebecca Wolff, a Jewish-American poet and editor of *Fence Magazine*, is at the top of her game in her third book of poems, *The King* (W.W. Norton, \$24.95), an engrossing glimpse into the mind of a new mother faced with postpartum depression. Wolff's poems are spare, often packed into short, jagged lines in which she authentically evokes the emotions of a mother alienated from her child and herself. In the aptly titled poem, “I live in the rectory,” Wolff writes of her distant feelings toward her child: “I can't tell the difference/between myself (momentarily)/and that one over there.” This loss of identity permeates the book. Many of Wolff's lines startle with their darkness; others are laced with humor. In “The Letdown,” her powerful poem about weaning her baby, Wolff writes: “I wiped that smile/right off your face/and by withholding/the milk from my breast/made a man out of you.” Although Wolff doesn't gloss over these harrowing experiences, the book is rife with sensual imagery and maternal love. In another section of “The Letdown” Wolff imagines nursing her child again. Her language softens to a calm lyricism: “I dreamed I nursed my baby/at my breast. In a rocker/on a steamship/by a porthole/the horizon.” Ultimately, the book is not just about her alienation and depression as a new mother, but also her redemption from these feelings: through these poems, Wolff gives voice to an experience that is all too common, and too often hidden behind closed doors.

Suzanne Gardinier is a poet like no other—visionary, feminist, historian, mystic. Her poems defy labels, and are entirely her own, though many are told in voices not her own. In her latest collection, *Dialogue with the Archipelago* (The Sheep Meadow Press, \$15.95), we hear from Eve, Demeter, Penelope, Helen, Persephone, among other heroines, with Gardinier's voice coming through in poems about the dissolution of a romantic relationship. The poems are often lessons in history, with references to the Vietnam War, the invasion of Panama, and World War II; and allusions as diverse as *The Book of Ruth*, *New York Review of Books*, and the *U.S.M.C. Unit Leaders Personal Response Handbook*. One of the threads of the book is the enslavement of women throughout history, with several poems depicting women breaking free from

their chains. In “Dialogue 55/To be continued,” Gardinier writes, “Once upon a time there was or there was not/a woman who stirred and opened her eyes/On a world that did not include her enslavement.” Some of the highlights of the book are Gardinier's lush love poems. Here is where the book—with its density of information, its leaps in time and space—becomes breathtaking.

from “Dialogue 35/Layla's Song”:

If you know that I haven't forgotten the language/we
made from the weapons and litter they gave us
If you know that the choked distance between us/is most
easily measured in years
Then explain why the crook of my elbow without
you/smells of you Why the desert plants' thirst
At the end of each long afternoon is your mouth/against
my mouth and I drink

It is with warm anticipation that I greet a new book by **Kim Addonizio**. Her poems are always accessible, sexy, sarcastic, and, at their core, deeply emotional and moving. Her fifth collection, *Lucifer at the Starlite* (W.W. Norton, \$23.95), is as dark and sardonic as the title suggests. Most of the poems extend beyond the personal subjects that are her usual theme to comment on current events and issues that define our times. The opening poem, “November 11th,” set on Veteran's Day 2004, days after George Bush was reelected president, begins: “O everyone's dead and the rain today is marvelous!” These lines set the tone for the book, whose focus on the bleakness and malice of the world comes from within the poet herself as well as from the world outside. The last section of the book showcases Addonizio's more confessional side, steeped in depression and looking for a way out. Here, Addonizio begins to resolve her rage, and something like hope begins to form. In the poem “News,” Addonizio looks out her window and sees her neighbor, “an old black man who lives alone.” She tries to connect to him, taking out her harmonica and playing a tune. Addonizio comments: “I don't know if he listened, if it lit/a match to the damp cigarette of his joy/I can't say, but maybe it did/in some small and unrecorded way.”

WENDY WISNER

A folklorist, author, photographer and seventh-generation Jerusalemite, Polak-Sahm turns her keen and compassionate attention to explore what motivates contemporary Israeli women to come every month to the mikveh. She relates her own traumatic first-time experience of mikveh preceding her first marriage. Years later, she returns to the same mikveh, just before her second wedding. She experi-

ences a personal transformation from painful alienation to a profound sense of sacredness and sisterhood. She recalls, years later, “Out of the five senses a sixth was born: I was flooded with an elemental emotion so stunning in its intensity, so acute, it was as if every fiber of my being was stirring wondrously to life.”

Eleven years later, that radical transformative experience prompts her to

return to the same mikveh yet again, as she seeks to understand herself and to explore the motivations and experiences of other Israeli women. Her book is unique amongst works about mikveh in that she draws on the deeply personal and revealing narratives of religious and secular women who come regularly to immerse.

The stories of these women come alive here as Polak-Sahm writes of religious

women for whom immersion is a commandment; of secular women for whom immersion constitutes spiritual renewal; and of the *balaniyot*, or mikveh attendants, who consider their occupation a calling from God. As such, this book aims to offer inspiration for Jewish women of all backgrounds.

MARION LEV-COHEN

As Jewish as Cannoli

A novel places Shushan in the American Midwest

Good For The Jews (University of Michigan Press, \$24) by **Debra Spark** affords a rare, if fictional, glimpse into

failings of Israel—no one would deny the state's failings—without seeing the failings of the Palestinians." In contrast to her cousin's agitated preoccupations, Ellen is allowed to cruise through life, her blond hair and beauty sparing her from questions about identity.

So what is "good for the Jews," the book implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—asks? Is it the blond Americana of Ellen's question-free life, or being aware of the underside of identity: prejudice, and even hatred? Ellen sees Mose as having a persecution complex: "He was the one who thought of himself as a victim: a victim of history. Good for the Jews, bad for the Jews, please. In her entire life, no one had ever made an issue of Ellen's reli-

brings home from his teacher the same way again.

JORDANA HORN

"Which Side Are You On?"

Esther Broner's novel of the 1960s.

In 1965, I took my teen-aged daughter on a special train to Montgomery, Alabama to meet the civil rights workers who were marching from Selma. We and the other passengers (mostly women) lustily sang "We Shall Overcome," and union songs: "Which Side are You On," and "Joe Hill." The train trip home to D.C. was sobering. We were warned to douse our lights for fear of snipers. The following morning we learned that Viola Liuzzo, a Detroit mother of five had been assassinated, ferrying marchers back to Selma. In the car of the Klansmen who shot her was an informant from the F.B.I.

For those of us who were activists in the sixties and seventies, *The Red Squad* by **E.M. Broner** (Pantheon, \$24) will be an affirmation of our memories. For others, perhaps too young to remember, the book will be an education. Broner limns a world of 1960s academia: romantic, comic, and above all, political. She cleverly cuts back and forth between the turbulent protests of the '60s and '70s to the story's present, the year of 9/11 and America's loss of innocence.

In 2000, Anka Papas, the book's protagonist and now a professor, receives an anonymous package containing an entire file kept on her political and personal life during the 1960s by a group called "The Red Squad." Anka muses, "Everything I think about the present and the past will be dictated by the enclosures of that envelope. Why was it sent to me? A reminder, a threat?" To solve the mystery, Anka is suddenly plunged back into her grad student days, laboring in what they called "The Bullpen," with assorted colleagues whose lives interestingly complicate the novel. They include a young priest seeking release from his church, a young Zionist longing to make aliya, a man seemingly overwhelmed by the responsibilities of marriage and family, and an

"Everything I think about the present and the past will be dictated by the enclosures of that envelope. Why was it sent to me? A reminder, a threat?"

the lives of Jews in the non-metropolitan Midwest during the era of George W. Bush's presidency.

Ellen Hirschorn, a beautiful and radiant woman in her twenties, is allegedly the protagonist of the story. In fact, the real protagonist is her older cousin, Mose Sheinbaum. Mose is less of a cousin and more of a father to Ellen, having raised her and her sister Barbara after their parents were killed in a car accident.

In an attenuated retelling of the Purim story, Mose is the one who feels that being Jewish is an important part of his identity. He is a high school history teacher, an eccentric beloved by his students who serves as the town conscience. He writes much-publicized letters to the editor regarding town council when they attempt to link Madison with the Palestinian city Rafah as a sister city: "Israel's existence is precarious. If we assent to this proposal, we say yes to a community that has said yes to suicide bombers, we say yes to anti-Semitism clothed as liberalism, which sees the

gion." Mose responds, "You're as Jewish as a cannoli, so you don't know what it is like for the Jews."

When Mose's normally positive teacher reviews turn poor under the leadership of Alex, a new assistant superintendent, the plot thickens: are his problems at work testament to his diminishing abilities, or to anti-Semitism? And how does Ellen's tepid romance with Alex fit in? Ellen is clearly Esther; Mose is Mordechai. But what happens in the new Shushan of Middle America?

Debra Spark's prose is best in its asides. Never throw-aways, each reflects the depth of the author behind them. Simply contemplating that the assistant superintendent signs his e-mails, "Smiles, Hyman," Ellen thinks, "Everyone she knew who used that sign-off had an appalling well of anger behind the antiquated, sugarcoated veneer.... In junior high, girls who put smiley faces under their names (or dotted their "i"s with hearts) were invariably full of venom." I'll never look at the letters my kindergartner

activist gay poet who “disappears” after his arrest. Anka teaches Freshman Comp to Detroit’s inner city students, whose life stories she establishes as the course’s curriculum. The students and their stories add even more texture to what might have been a narrower focus.

Broner evokes a time, not so long ago, of furtive ferrying of “draft dodgers” to Canada, of the underground railway for seekers of safe abortions, of harassment of protesters by police and battles with both a conservative university administration and a conservative school newspaper editor. Through spot-on description she recreates an already dying Detroit, a city riven by expressways that divide neighborhood from neighborhood and decimated by “White Flight,” a city energized only by the emergence of Motown music.

At the book’s perhaps too neat conclusion, the characters all gather at the reemergence of their “disappeared” colleague, gone underground for decades because of his political activities. There they solve the mystery at the book’s core, the identity of the spy in their midst and his reasons for betraying them all. *The Red Squad* may be

a slim volume, but it sports a remarkably sturdy spine. Pun absolutely intended.

FAYE MOSKOWITZ

Modest Hasidic Girls

“When you become a boy, you’ll understand.”

Ayala Fader’s *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn* (Princeton University Press, \$22.95) reveals how through everyday talk Hasidic women teach their daughters to discipline their bodies and their minds to serve God.

Hasidic girls want to be “with it” but not “modern.” This unique formulation allows them to be involved in limited ways in the secular world, while still emulating the religious stringency of their mothers and female teachers. Fader observes that school-age girls stop speaking Yiddish, despite communal pressure. English helps Hasidic women interpret and selectively incorporate the secular world for their own means, so the girls view English as sophisticated and “high-class” while not

being too “modern.” They also observe men’s authority as tied to religious observance and Yiddish fluency, as Fader documents in an unusually technical section of the book dealing with linguistic theory and language choice.

Fader describes how parents’ moral influence on their children is gendered. Hasidic women, peers, and older siblings teach girls to be curious, yet not challenge the authority of teachers, mothers, men and God. Girls who question gender divisions in Hasidic life are given “non-answers,” either through teasing or via comments intended to invoke the religious basis of these gender differences. Fader quotes the following revealing exchange in a girls’ classroom. “A little girl named Chana raised her hand, was called on, and asked: ‘*Vuz is mishnays?*’ (What is the Mishna?). Mrs. Silver (the teacher)....told Chana in Yiddish, ‘When you become a boy, you’ll understand.’ Everyone laughed, including Chana and Mrs. Silver.”

Hasidic girls are taught that their modesty, explained as the obligation to protect men from “arousal,” is as impor-



tant as men's Torah study. One woman told Fader that it was her responsibility to cross the street when she saw a young man on her side of the street, as the streets "belong to the men." However, Fader discovered that modesty does not mean shyness or frumpiness. Outgoing, assertive, and fashionably dressed women were the norm in that community. Yet there are limits: According to Fader, at the Bnos Yisruel school, "every morning teachers walk up and down the aisles making sure that each girl is wearing appropriate stockings (no sheer or black stockings allowed)." Other prohibitions include lifting up their skirts too high to jump rope, yelling or using "bad words," or looking at forbidden secular books. Modesty also shapes discussions of marriage and sexuality. Fader was first denied entry to a local Hasidic premarital class, as the parents of the engaged girls didn't want them to be exposed to someone "different" who would "confuse" them while they learn how to speak modestly with their new husbands about sexuality. They are encouraged to use Hebrew to refer to intercourse or genitals, and teachers suggest that they think about "holy sages" during sex.

In the last decade there have been a number of feminist studies on Orthodox and Hasidic women. Lynn Davidman and Debra Kaufman studied *baalot teshuvah* (newly-Orthodox women), Bonnie Morris and Stephanie Wellen Levine focused, respectively, on Lubavitcher women and girls, and Hella Winston wrote about Satmar Hasidim who left the fold. Fader situates her study among these, and notes that like them, she struggled with how to balance her subjects' efforts at *kiruv* (religious outreach) with her goals for her intensive research. She also had to confront ethical issues, such as writing about topics that Fader's informants didn't want publicized. Fader's reflections on fieldwork, such as when she agonizes over whether or not to wear a bathing suit with a group of Hasidic women and girls at a pool with gender-segregated hours, or how her young daughter peppered her with challenging questions when they visited Boro Park ("Why are these girls

wearing skirts? "What's modesty?" "Do we follow what's in the Bible?"), personalize the fairly academic tone of the book, inviting us further into the world it explores.

SUSAN SAPIRO

Still Jewish?

How gender plays out in intermarriage

In *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America* (New York University Press, \$39), **Keren McGinity** argues that while for the most part American Jewish women married to non-Jewish men have always maintained some connections to the Jewish community, since the 1960s intermarried women have remained actively Jewish at ever-increasing levels. In doing so, McGinity offers a rejoinder to those who believe that intermarrying Jews cut themselves off from their community and thus that increasing rates of intermarriage will cause the eventual death of the Jewish people. Instead, as she shows, intermarriage and childbearing can actually lead Jewish women to increase their ties to the community

considered front-page news. McGinity shows that each maintained a sense of Jewish identity despite dabbling in the practices of other religions (Antin) or identifying more emphatically with a different element of her identity such as politics (Pastor). But as Strunsky's case illustrates, in their marriages these three Jewish women faced challenges even more significant than religious differences, including societal expectations for men and women and economic disparity between the sexes.

As she moves from the 1930s forward, McGinity examines intermarried Jewish women in the context of American society. She reminds her readers how, in the 1960s and 1970s, the perception of anti-Semitism in the feminist movement led many intermarried women to reassert their own Jewish identities. As a distinct Jewish feminism developed, more Jewish women felt comfortable announcing their right to "retain, reclaim or redefine their ethnic and religious heritage." She argues that intermarried Jewish women were swept up in this project alongside their in-married sisters, and took on the responsibility of ensuring that their children were raised in

As a distinct Jewish feminism developed, more intermarried Jewish women began to assert the claim to their own heritage.

and to pursue further Jewish involvement and education for themselves and their children. She thus adds a new perspective to research about intermarriage and its effects on the Jewish community.

McGinity's approach is both historical and sociological, allowing her to highlight changes in the lives of intermarried women since the early 20th century. The book begins with sketches of three immigrant Jewish women who married non-Jewish men: memoirist Mary Antin, and political activists Rose Pastor and Anna Strunsky. All married in the early years of the 20th century, when the marriage of a Jew to an upper-class Christian was con-

Jewish homes. This happened even as social barriers to intermarriage began receding and rates of intermarriage increased.

McGinity incorporates accounts of the changing policies adopted by the Reform movement and other Jewish entities including the shift from the Central Conference of American Rabbis' harsh rejection of intermarriage in 1909 to the formation of the Rabbinic Center for Research and Counseling, which maintained a list of Reform rabbis willing to officiate at mixed marriages in 1970; and, in 1983, the CCAR's decision to accept patrilineal descent as a marker of Jewish identity, provided the child in question

was being raised in a Jewish home. At the same time, McGinity's work makes clear the need for further study of intermarriage including experiences of Jewish men; comparisons of intermarried and in-married Jewish women; consideration of same-sex intermarriages; and, finally, larger sociological studies of contemporary women that might draw out regional or local differences not apparent in McGinity's survey, which is limited to women in the Boston area.

CLAIRE E. SUFRIN

Shira of Rothenburg

The imagined wife of a famous medieval rabbi

Joining the growing roster of historical fiction that aspires to give voice to Jewish women of eras past, *The Fruit of Her Hands: The Story of Shira of Ashkenaz* a debut novel by **Michelle Cameron** (Pocket Books/Simon and Schuster, \$25), narrates the life of the imagined spouse of renowned 13th century authority Rabbi Meir ben Barukh of Rothenburg. Following Shira from childhood to old age and from France to Germany, to England, and back again, the author has created a portrait of medieval life, and of medieval Jewish womanhood in particular, that is both exotic and surprisingly familiar.

Cameron interlaces historical events with fanciful vignettes of daily life under the tiled roofs and in the cobble-stoned lanes of European towns and hamlets. Authoritative sources indicate that Rabbi Meir (and perhaps his wife) did indeed witness some of the incidents the author depicts, including the 1242 burning of the Talmud in Paris; others are creatively woven into the plot although they are not actually associated with the historical figure, such as the 1255 ritual murder charge in Lincoln, which Cameron imagines Shira to have experienced while visiting her married daughter. The freedom of historical movement granted to the fictional Shira affords the author and her readers an opportunity to connect these events and to add layers of drama and nuance to what is often a sparse historical register.

Several of the sub-plots in Cameron's novel, as well as details of daily life, are cleverly culled from the vast body of legal response that form Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg's historical and halakhic legacy. The saga of a congregant's disputed betrothal; the 21-room building that the family occupied in Rothenburg; Shira's decision to decline the honor of holding her grandson at his circumcision ceremony; and the tension between Shira and her husband over the betrothal of their 9-year-old daughter all have a basis in Rabbi Meir's rulings. Although I know it's unsuitable to the genre of fiction, as a student of medieval history and rabbinic literature, I found myself wishing that Cameron had included footnotes!

Unfortunately, a few historical inaccuracies mar the landscape, one of the most glaring in the book's very title. I am not sure why the author called her heroine Shira—it's a modern Hebrew name that would have been extremely unlikely for a medieval Jewish woman. Though perhaps a surface detail, this anachronism is indicative of a series of lapses in historical precision, mistakes in rabbinic terminology, and, more significantly, questionable assumptions about the dynamics of interaction between 13th century men and women, Jews and non-Jews, nobles and commonfolk. At several junctures, the reader is left sensing that were the background details to be exchanged, the same scene could be taking place in contemporary Brooklyn or Jerusalem.

In Shira, Cameron has produced a character who challenges the classic image of illogical and illiterate medieval women, yet for all her book-learning and thirst for religious engagement, Shira is far from a radical; after protesting and "flicking away tears," she submits to the authority of the men around her on nearly every occasion. This characterization may reflect the author's attempt at historical authenticity, but it left me wishing for more depth and complexity. Nonetheless, Shira's story is a noteworthy attempt at reclaiming the lives of medieval women and adding their testimony to our portraits of the past.

RACHEL FURST

Our Reviewers

ALICE SPARBERG ALEXIOU, a contributing editor to *Lilith*, is the author of *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary* (2006). Her new book, *Flatiron*, about the New York City landmark building, will be published in June 2010 by St. Martin's Press.

KIRSTEN FERMAGLICH is associate professor of history and Jewish studies at Michigan State University.

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JORDANA HORN is a lawyer and writer at work on her first novel.

MARION LEV-COHEN is in her last year of rabbinical school at HUC-JIR, New York. Her current project is creating a liberal mikveh for the New York area.

SARA N. S. MEIROWITZ writes, edits, teaches, and memorizes poetry in Jerusalem.

FAYE MOSKOWITZ is a professor of creative writing and Jewish-American literature at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

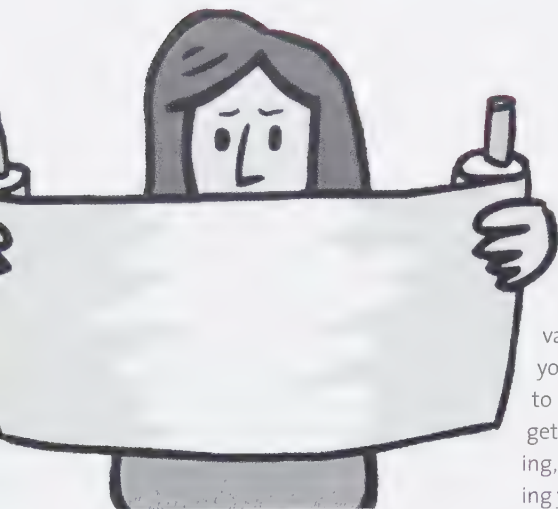
SUSAN SAPIRO is a writer and reviewer on Jewish gender and work-life issues in New York.

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WENDY WISNER is the author of the book of poems *Epicenter*. Her poetry has appeared in *The Spoon River Review*, *Rhino*, and elsewhere.

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HAPPENING



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is a weekly cartoon about the story Jews are reading in the Torah. A different writer—Mayim Bialik, Dara Horn, Esther Kustanowitz, Dahlia Lithwick and others—tells each parsha (Torah portion) in 4 minutes. Some are stories, others are country songs or hip hop. Then it's animated. New episodes drop every Monday, and free curricula are available for teachers. Created by Sarah Lefton, G-dcast wants to raise basic Jewish literacy, spark conversations about Jewish ideas, and—she hopes—revolutionize Judaism by helping people crack open texts they may never have tried to read before. Free at g-dcast.com.

Personal Milestones

Looking to mark a personal milestone with a Jewish ritual, create meaningful ceremonies, or find an expert facilitator who can help? This organization maintains a database of rabbis, cantors, service leaders, teachers, tutors, Jewish hospital and hospice chaplains, artists, musicians, and others. Contact Deb Fink (Deb@JewishMilestones.org) to be included in their database or to get help. They plan to expand beyond the Bay Area with their services and library, which also lends out music and Jewish ritual objects (a Torah, a portable ark, prayer shawls, a chuppah, and more). JewishMilestones.org

Staying Afloat When the Economy Sinks

Share ideas, swap resources, learn coping strategies and skills and stay motivated. You'll learn to identify what career you're best suited for, as well as strategies to market yourself for a particular job, plus get guidance on networking, resume writing, preparing for interviews and negotiating your compensation package. Check with your local Jewish Federation and congregations to see what they might offer, like this helpful program in New York. Connect to Care: jcprograms.org/connect-to-care

Be the Tenth

You can become the tenth person of a virtual minyan, the quorum needed for communal Jewish prayer. This website, created by artist Miriam Stern in memory of her mother, offers an experiential understanding of the practice of saying kaddish (although reciting kaddish in this way does not fulfill one's obligation according to traditional Jewish law). "Being a feminist," says Stern, "I made a point to include and count women equally in every minyan setting, including the mehitza minyan on the site. In that minyan, there are always 10 women as well as 10 men counted in order to begin the kaddish. Bethetenth.com



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Ever thought about teaching in a Hebrew Day School? Brandeis University offers a full tuition scholarship, medical benefits, and a \$10,000 stipend for a 14-month program culminating in a Masters of Arts in Teaching with a specialty in day schools. brandeis.edu/mandel/DeLeT



TransTorah

A collective of rabbis, educators and others wants people of all genders to access and transform Jewish tradition; they help Jewish communities welcome people of whatever gender. Their resources include a pre-transition mikveh ritual written by Max Strassfeld and Andrew Ramer, and a bibliography of transgender Jewish resources by Vered Meir. They also offer a challenge: you can make your synagogue more accessible to transgender and gender-nonconforming people by providing a gender-neutral bathroom option (with its own sign, created by Michah Bazant). www.transtorah.org

The Whole Megillah

Teach yourself to chant the Scroll of Esther—the Megillah—in Hebrew by following an on-screen text while you listen; study halakhic sources on women reading megillah, and learn how to organize a megillah reading. This interactive Megillat Esther CD-ROM "Blessed Be Esther," was created by the

Minyan Naava Tehila in Jerusalem

"Beautiful praise" (in Hebrew) is a five-year-old egalitarian prayer and study community that welcomes people of diverse backgrounds looking for spiritual expressions with a Jewish flavor. Under the guidance of Rabbi Ruth Gan Kagan, the group meets Friday evenings, once a month, for Kabbalat Shabbat and a dairy potluck meal, singing, acoustic music and Torah teachings until the wee hours of the morning. Navatehila.org

Sustainable Living in Israel

A Sukkah that gives shade in harvest time, and rains that we pray for, are among the Biblical agricultural precepts made relevant in hands on ways for English-speaking men and women ages 18–30 interested in sustainable living in an authentic Jewish context. They spend almost six months living on the Hava & Adam environmental educational center and ecological farm in central Israel. Along with Israeli army-age volunteers, they cre-

ate a self-reliant community—living "off the grid," growing and preparing their own food, using solar showers, compost toilets, solar-powered electricity, and recycling creatively since they have no refuse collection. You can join them! Learn ecological architecture, ethnic crafts, vegetarian organic food preparation, and Hebrew. Contribute your labor to this co-operative organic farm and seed-bank, and receive an internationally recognized Certificate in Permaculture Design. Eco-Israel.org

Talking about Israel

Does "land" have spiritual meaning for us? Should Israeli Arabs serve in the Israel Defense Forces? How are Israeli and American visions of Judaism different and the same? In "Bringing Conversations about Israel into the Life of American Congregations" Alex Sinclair and Esti Moskovitz-Kalman recommend moving beyond political and philanthropic support to something more personal. synagogue3000.org/files/IsraelConversations.pdf



Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance in memory of their board member Esther Farber. jofa.org/about.php/publications/megillatesth

Jewish Interfaith Relationships

For an anthology on this theme, editor Hila Ratzabi seeks personal essays on the joys and challenges by writers who are Jewish or nonJewish women in a Jewish interfaith relationship or marriage (one of the partners is Jewish, the writer must be a woman, can be any sexual orientation). Submit your 1000–2000 words by May 1, 2010 to interfaithessay@gmail.com

Tuition-Free Training

Here's an opportunity for 20 young female future leaders from the Jewish nonprofit and education world to connect, network, gain skills. You'll learn financial literacy, negotiation, conflict resolution, how to run a meeting, give a stump speech, and advocate. This tuition-free program, February 26–28, 2010, includes all training, room and board in Ancramdale, New York. It's offered by the Woodhull Institute, which provides ethical leadership training to women. Contact Laura Sinkman, LSinkman@woodhull.org, 646-435-0837. Woodhull.org

Take a Tu B'Shvat Hike

In a sacred redwood grove in the East Bay hills of California and enjoy an experiential Tu B'Shvat seder, modeled after the mystics of Safed in Israel. Celebrate freedom and awakening on Passover at a five-day gathering in the California desert wilderness: camping, eating, praying, learning together and immersing in the Exodus experience. Wilderness Torah, a Bay Area nonprofit, models and teaches sustainable life skills using Jewish experiences through an annual cycle of land-based pilgrimage festivals, and earth-based rites of passage, such as a bat/bar mitzvah. WildernessTorah.org

A Time to be Born

A Faith-Based Guide to Assisted Reproductive Technologies is the first multi-faith resource exploring the scientific and ethical complexities of reproductive technologies from a religious perspective. It's intended to help clergy and other religious professionals provide informed counsel and ethical reflection on the use of these technologies. The Religious Institute, based in Westport, CT, is a nonprofit organization advocating for sexual health, education and justice in faith communities and society. Of the

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nearly 5000 clergy and religious leaders, representing more than 50 faith traditions, 10% of the members of this national network are Jewish. religiousinstitute.org.

For events and projects taking place between issues of Lilith, check out WHAT'S NEW on the Lilith homepage: www.Lilith.org, where you can also sign up for Lilith's free e-mail newsletter. Send suggestions for this section to info@Lilith.org

—compiled by Naomi Danis

BEAUTIFUL GIRL IN THE SNOW

by ANNA SCHNUR-FISHMAN



I RECENTLY SPENT SEVERAL MONTHS IN CENTRAL CHINA, working at a private (non-state) orphanage for very ill babies. My job was largely to care for them: diaper and feed them, play with them, put them to sleep, hold them. It is illegal to give up babies in China, so parents who can't afford a sick child have to abandon it, usually in a public place where they hope she will be found soon. Intensively an outsider—linguistically, culturally, medically—I didn't understand a lot of what went on around me.

What follows is a diary entry of mine from a day, a tragic one, when I found Judaism helpful.

Friday morning a two-month-old baby was left near the orphanage. She was in bad condition, so when they discovered her they brought her right to us. The state-orphanage doctor didn't know what was wrong with her, but she was nearly gray and her breathing very labored. (There were medications left with her, but without explanation.) Here she had oxygen, a nose feed, and intravenous antibiotics. By Saturday she looked half-dead already, but I thought of people I knew who had almost died as babies, but then had made it... although I guess medical miracles are more likely to happen in hospitals, especially good hospitals. The director said that as soon as the baby—the staff named her Beautiful Girl in the Snow—could withstand the journey, we'd send her on to a proper hospital. I felt very strongly that she should be held all the time, which people agreed to. Oh, God, it's so sad. She died late that night.

There are many, many things to say about this, but I think I will just include the little eulogy that I gave her, on our roof, where her body spent the time waiting to be taken to the cemetery (a time when, in Jewish tradition, the body is not left alone)—she was in a blanket, in a dirt-covered green plastic bin, in a red turret built for this specific purpose:

Baby, we barely got to know you at all. You weren't even here for two days. We know you had big, dark eyes, and a strong

grip, and a hard, brief life. We know the peaceful name we gave you—Beautiful Girl in the Snow—and we hope that you have found that peace. And we hope that your parents' souls feel the peace of your soul. May you be comforted. And may they be comforted. And may we be comforted. And, baby, we want you to know that you will be remembered, if only by the handful of us who are visitors to your world, which is no longer your world.

Aside from this, which I did alone, her death was unmarked. I am very grateful for the Jewish customs around death that were automatic for me, even the formula, "May _____ be comforted." Without these symbolic gestures, I wouldn't know how to express my respect, distress and devotion. I sang *El Maley Rachamim* (a bunch of times; I couldn't stop) before her little eulogy, inserting the surname for orphans, *Beautiful Girl in the Snow bat Avraham v'Sara*. And then when I saw, out the window, the orphanage director carrying her green bin away, I put a rock on the last spot I saw them.

Okay. That's the last thing I will say about Beautiful Girl in the Snow. I'm surprised that my faith, these past two days, helped me know my place as a stranger, as a privileged visitor. I remember a friend once telling me, "Jews have often been strangers. Customs are what we take with us." ■

Anna Schnur-Fishman is a senior at Brown University. She loves linguistics, writing, Yiddish, and babies. Forthcoming from Kar-Ben Publishing this fall is her children's book about a family's outdoor tashlich ritual, Tashlich at Turtle Rock.

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